

# DEATH OF THE LEADER★

Dorota Jarecka talks to Yael Bartana



*The interview was held in Warsaw, Poland, in January 2011 and was published in Wysokie Obcasy, supplement to Gazeta Wyborcza 09.05.2011 (nr. 84).*

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*Yael Bartana, an artist born and raised in Israel, will represent Poland at this year's Venice Biennale, the world's most important exhibition of contemporary art. What was your reaction to the decision of the jury?*

I was a bit surprised. Among the other entries was a project by Piotr Uklański. I was thinking: he'll win, he's an outstanding artist, a Pole, and I'm from Israel. Although my mother thinks I'm very Polish. She said, 'Let them call me, I'll tell them how much!'

*Why? Is it family history?*

My paternal grandfather came from Białystok. He left Poland in the early 1920s. My maternal grandfather, in turn, was born in Bereza Kartuska, which is in Belarus today, but before the War it was Poland. If he argued with his neighbours, it was always in Polish. My great-grandparents died in 1940 in a synagogue in Białystok, murdered by the Nazis. I don't know much more, I never met my grandparents, my mother is 80 now and my father died a year ago. He was already very sick when I started working on the Polish project, so I couldn't get him to tell me anything. My parents have never visited Poland. Now my mother has become a bit interested, but still she hasn't visited. She's waiting for me to take her. I'm happy to be able to carry out my project here, I feel part of the culture on some level and I wanted to contribute to it.

*What were the reactions in Israel?*

Mixed. Right after my Israeli gallery had sent out a newsletter with the news, I received about twenty phone calls from newspaper, radio and TV journalists. But those who commented on it on the web immediately sent me to the gas chamber.



What do you mean?

That’s the image of Poland held by an ordinary Israeli who knows nothing about art, my project, or who I am. The image of Poland is very negative in Israel, Israelis are convinced Poles are anti-Semites, so if I return here, then, of course, I’ll be victimised, history will repeat itself. Perhaps that’s nothing to care about, people often write negative comments on the Internet from all over the world. There’s also been an antagonism amongst the intellectuals. Some people don’t understand, for instance, why I am representing Poland. Someone asked me why I wasn’t representing Israel, I replied I was not selected. And I don’t know if I’d want to, in fact.

You are currently making a film for the Venice Biennale. It will be the third part of a trilogy. In the first, Mary Koszmary (Nightmares), a Polish socialist leader, Sławomir Sierakowski urges three million Jews to return to Poland. In the second, Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower), Jews return, build a kibbutz in Warsaw, and are welcomed heartily. What will happen next? Various scenarios occur to me. Probably not very fortunate ones, if we think historically.

But I have no intention of repeating historical scenarios. I am interested in creating a myth which could mobilise the masses to take to the streets. Those masses will herald the birth of a new Polish society.

Who will lead them out to the streets?

The death of their leader. In the third part, called *Zamach (Assassination)*, the movement’s leader, the guy who called Jews to return, is assassinated. We won’t see the actual assassination. We don’t know who killed him. We don’t know the killer’s motives. It could have been a Polish nationalist as well as an Israeli Zionist. Or just a madman. What I wanted is for the leader of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland to die in the same way as many leaders of progressive social movements – assassinated. Like Gabriel Narutowicz, Martin Luther King Jr., Yitzhak Rabin, Benazir Bhutto or Mahatma Gandhi. People will gather in the streets of Warsaw to pay homage to him. Lit de Parade, a memorial ceremony will be held, here a mix of reality and fiction will be intertwine. Real people such as Alona Frankel – a holocaust survivor from Poland, Anda Rottenberg – a Polish art historian and curator, and Yaron London – a journalist and publicist from Israel, will deliver political speeches. There will also be speeches by the movement’s members to emphasise that the movement is still alive.

Thanks to the leader's death?

Yes, but it also takes more – gaining social acceptance in Poland. I’d like for people to carry banners, for example, ‘Nationalism = Terrorism’, so that it looks like a real street protest, so that the viewer can see it as a documentary. What I want is the impression that the movement is not a fiction or fantasy, but that it could be real.

What do you mean by real? We know that an appeal for Jews to return to Poland is anything but real. What are the chances of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland?

If you read our manifesto more closely, you will see that although it starts with Polish-Jewish relations, it speaks about something larger. About a vision of Polish society, a dream. This is not an appeal to Jews only. I open the concept of the Jew there in a way. The title of my exhibition in the Polish Pavilion in Venice, *...and Europe will be stunned*, suggests that Poland could become an example of how a society could treat minorities, and how it could live with them. I’d like to turn attention to minorities, to give power to those who usually don’t have it. I want Polish-based Africans, Russians, Vietnamese, Ukrainians, Jews to appear in the film. The fact that they will be representing the Polish nation can have a positive effect on reality, and cause change. I also speak about Europe, about the fact that increasing migrations are feeding nationalisms and right-wing movements. What I do goes against this.

You want to blur the idea of the nation? There is no Jew because everyone can be a Jew? Or a Pole?

All those chosen peoples! Poles as a chosen people, Jews as a chosen people. Historically this is interesting, but I don’t know whether it can function today.

But there is a messianic element in all that – a movement's rebirth through the death of its leader. And, like in Mickiewicz's Jewish Legion formed in the year 1855 by the famous Polish poet in the environs of the city of Constantinople (today Istanbul) to fight Polish independency against Russia, Jews help to save Poland. Does your work stem from the Polish Romantic tradition or the Jewish one?

The Jewish one. We had Sabbatai Zevi, a false messiah. He was active in the Ottoman Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Gershom Sholem wrote a book about him. He believed himself to be a messiah who would bring Jews salvation, a Jewish renaissance. Salvation came, for him, when he converted from Judaism to Islam. We can hardly avoid messianic connotations in this film, there is also a Jewish renaissance movement here, a great agitation of the masses...

You're smiling.

Because I approached it from a different direction. I’m not religious, what I’m interested in is the new Polish Left. In my film the leader calls for a new, heterogeneous society, saying that Poles will be better if they accept others. What is most important for me is the question whether society is really going in that direction or confining itself in nationalism.

Compared with five or ten years ago Poland is more open towards immigrants. It's easier to come here, to settle. Public attitude towards foreigners has been changing.

But how many minorities do you have? It’s not a high percentage. Where are the non-Poles? I see only similar faces. In 2003 I lived for five months in Malmö, Sweden, and I never saw foreigners downtown, I saw them only in the suburbs, it was an immigrant ghetto. In the Netherlands, where I have a residence permit, the government recently wanted to tighten immigration laws, and one politician said that religious Jews should go live elsewhere. Only it’s not Jews who are seen as the main problem in Europe, but Muslims. In Israel we’ve also seen a strong rise in nationalism. Even the Labour Party is weakening. and now we only have right-wing and centre parties. And as for culture and the arts, the right-wing government now wants to promote its new art prize, \$50,000, for those who maintain Zionist values in art.

Zionism – what does it mean today?

For me Zionism represents something that I no longer believe in. What I feel closer to is the so called post-Zionist movement, which emerged in the 1990s: the best-known representative of which is Ilan Pappé. It criticises the state of Israel for its blinkered narrative: Israel is a place for Jews. But there is something in the ideology of early Zionism that I feel close to. It was an attempt to believe that you can create a fair society. Arriving in Palestine, immigrants from Central Europe, mainly Russian and Polish citizens, had a real faith in socialism, in fighting the bourgeoisie. Now that faith seems dead. But I think that if there is something I long for in life it is the faith that you can change something and I believe that political art is a good tool for that.

In your work you use the language of Zionist propaganda. In the film Wall and Tower we see young people building a kibbutz: there is a scene that monumentalises the figures, music to rouse people to work, muscular bodies, smiling, suntanned faces. In the film installation Summer Camp/Avodah you cite Helmar Lerski's 1930s film Avodah (Work) about immigrants from Europe building settlements in Palestine. A film about great hope, filled with optimism.





I found out about it a several years ago in Linz, at a conference on Jewish identity. Raz Yosef, a researcher of queer film and Israeli cinema, had a lecture there in which he analysed early Zionist films from the homoerotic perspective. These are propaganda films that are highly appealing to the senses. The actors look like a fulfilment of the vision of Max Nordau, an early Zionist, who wrote about the need to create a physical ideal of the new Jew: manly, beautiful, athletic. I watched many movies from the era, I visited the Jerusalem Cinemateque, and I decided that *Avodah* was the best of those made so far. It appealed to me all the more powerfully because I grew up among such people, possessing that work ethos.

You were born in the moshav Kfar Yehezkel.  
What kind of place is that?

A moshav is a settlement established by a group of families, kfar means village, and Yehezkel is the person who donated that piece of land to them. It was created in 1921, even before the creation of the state of Israel, and most of the settlers were Russian Jews. I was surrounded by families working in the fields, cows, olive trees.

And your parents?

There weren't from there. My father was a veterinarian, and my mother a teacher. My father was born in Jerusalem, my mother in Tel Aviv, they were both Israeli freedom fighters who fought in the War of Independence of 1948. My father even got arrested by the British. Then he went to Europe because he wanted to study and there was no such possibility in Israel. He completed his studies in Zurich, my elder brothers and sisters were born in Switzerland, and then he returned and got a job in precisely that village. I grew up wrapped in cotton wool, in a capsule, in a very conformist ideology.

Why conformist?

Because there was only one way of life: to serve the country, Arabs are a minority and your enemy. You have to join the army, participate in collective rituals. You mustn't think differently or resist. There was no discussion. When I was little, one of my brothers was conscripted to fight in the war in Lebanon. He had no doubts at all then, they only started later. He became a refusenik. During the First Intifada [1987–93] he got the call-up to go to the occupied territories to contain riots. They put him in jail for refusal to follow orders. I was 20 and nearing the completion of my own service. Two years: a terrible waste of time. But at that time I was still part of it all – I became critical only later.

And in 2000 you made Profile, a slow-motion analysis of the face of a woman preparing for a shot during a military shooting drill.  
And Trembling Time, the moment when all traffic in Israel stops and the sirens wail in a Memorial Day tribute to fallen soldiers. And then Wild Seeds, where a group of teenagers play a strange game – eviction of West-Bank settlers – with some acting as soldiers and some as settlers. You show collective rituals and their collective abreaction. Why the critical attitude?

I think it's because I've left Israel. In 1996 I graduated from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, but the Israeli art world held no interest for me, I felt no connection with it. I went to the US and made short films while working commercially as a graphic artist. In New York I met a group of Israelis, highly critical of Israel, so it was like I had left and had not left, I was still emotionally connected with the country. Upon turning thirty, I decided I was an artist after all and had to take it seriously. My filmic language was evolving more and more towards realism and documentary.

You came to Poland for the first time in 2006 on the invitation of Joanna Mytkowska and Andrzej Przywara at Foksal Gallery Foundation in Warsaw. Your impressions?

Complex emotions. I stood by a church, thinking that Poland is a Catholic country, unable to leave, experiencing fear. I went to the south of Poland. What made the strongest impression on me were the small towns where the Jewish community lived



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before the war, the empty streets. I imagined them filling with people. It's hard to separate what you see from films about the Holocaust, from images of the shtetl. I tried to be there as a tourist. But that proved impossible, I was experiencing too much. I wanted to learn more, so I reached for books; I read Jan T. Gross while still in Poland and other historical books later. Of course, I knew the history of World War II, but it was only being there that I realised the history of Jews in Poland dated back to the 15th century or earlier. Because, for me, being a Jew and being an Israeli are two different things.

Where is the difference?

In identity. Jews raised in Europe had a different identity, I grew up in Israel. Everything happened according to the Jewish customs, we observed the religious holidays. But I still don't know what it means to be a Jew, although I was born to be a Jew. Who is a Jew is something that has changed over history, the Nuremberg Laws defined it, the state of Israel defined it. I'd like to ask the question again through my work as today, in the era of globalisation, that identity has gained a new meaning. Because I believe the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland is also for Jews, it could be a renewal of Jewishness, bring about a renaissance of the concept of the Jew, similar to that experienced today by, for instance, the concept of the European.

Let's return to Poland.

You are here you read books...

And I start thinking about how to propose something that will open a discussion on Polish and Jewish identity. I want to use the power of art to imagine something that for many people is unimaginable and controversial. To try and write new pages in history. To provoke history.

History or fiction?

Making a film, I tell a fictional story yet the content is touching the real – real matters, real stories, real needs. The element of fiction has played an important role in actual history. Sometimes it's enough to simply imagine a different world. Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* was a work of fiction. He used the form of a literary novel to write a sort of handbook on how the future Jewish state should be organised. I'm in dialogue with Herzl.

What was the idea you actually hit upon?

A propaganda film urging Jews to return to Poland. I searched for a collaborator, a Pole, who would deliver the actual message. I met Sławomir Sierakowski, chief editor of *Krytyka Polityczna*, a representative of the young Polish left. We talked about the fact that there is a nostalgia, or longing, for Jews in Poland, a guilt complex. I asked him whether he could write a speech, a possible invitation for Jews to come to Poland so that the trauma could be healed. I was deeply moved and fascinated by the speech he wrote with Kinga Dunin. I can repeat part of it in Polish.

What surprised you?

The figure of Ryfka. The opening sentences about an old woman lying in bed under an eiderdown and waiting for Ryfka, who may come to claim the eiderdown back. I thought that was very powerful for the beginning of a speech, but also as a statement, a vision. Following that I created the character Ryfka: the ghost of return. She will appear in the last part of the trilogy.

To overcome trauma, but whose?

The Poles' or the Jews'?

The one that the two nations have.

Our trauma is a complex of guilt.

Ours too, at least a part of society.

What kind of guilt?

Towards the Palestinians. In *Mary Koszmary* I wanted to do away with a sense of guilt. It speaks about Poland as well as about Israel. It can be read two ways, like in a mirror – there's one side and the other side. And that's how it was interpreted in Israel – as a plea for forgiveness, a call for the Palestinians to return.

In the next film the Jews return and build a kibbutz in Warsaw. It looks ominous, like defensive architecture. A new ghetto.

Yes, but the history of the kibbutzniks shows that people didn't stay there forever. The kibbutz was part of a strategy to occupy a country. Such structures, with a tall fence and a watchtower, were built to protect people during the Arab revolt. Such kibbutzes still exist, now turned into monuments. The movement built a kibbutz in Warsaw in a place where the construction of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews began shortly thereafter. This can be understood symbolically – as the beginning of the museum. The kibbutz lasted shortly, as scenery for a film. When we were building it, an Israeli woman who came to Poland to see Natan Rappaport's Ghetto Heroes Memorial in Warsaw came to us and said that the kibbutz should stay there, to show to the Poles that we are still alive, that there is power in us. And that it should be called Yad Mordechai in the memory of Mordechai Anielewicz – the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943. Jews are very proud that they've made it. Of course, in the Israeli context the meaning of the kibbutz is different.

What is it?

A kind of allegory.

For me building a kibbutz is part of the Zionist ethos. But over time the ethos has vanished, we're now an occupier. All Israel is like a gated community today, like a ghetto, surrounded with a wall and tower. A great wall on one side, the sea on the other, fences wherever you go. They tell us the enemy is everywhere, that everyone is against us.

But the Arabs threaten you – with their bombs, weapons.

Because this is how we treat them, not like human beings. If I treated you like this, you'd react in the same way, I hope. Although many of them have already learned to live like victims. I have a friend, an artist, who lives in Ramallah. He saw my films and said, "But you can't leave us now to go to Poland, we, the Palestinians, won't do it without you."

Taking it ironically, that would be a solution to the Middle East conflict. Although, in the face of the current Arab Revolutions, the whole thing is not so simple anymore.

It isn't ironic at all. Europe is responsible for the state of Israel. There was the Holocaust, a solution had to be found. You decided to create a state for Jews. Now Europe should solve the problem further because we live in a state of constant danger. Is it safe in Israel? It isn't. I feel uncomfortable driving an hour's ride from Tel Aviv, because I'll find myself in Gaza, I'm worried to go to Ramallah, I go, but I can't say I'm not afraid. Is this the Jewish state that Herzl had envisaged for us? I don't think so.

But is it better here? More safe, perhaps, but the quality of life is lower.

Jews will improve it, they're experts in getting the economy going.

If I said that, it'd sound like an anti-Semitic stereotype.

But what are we saying in the manifesto? This is not an appeal to Jews, it's an appeal to all those who don't feel at home in their country. Poles can join the movement too.

Mickiewicz said, 'Your homeland is where it's bad.'

I'll write that down. But "bad" in what sense? That the conditions are bad or that you feel bad there?

Both.



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Video stills

**2, 4** \_ Mary Koszmary (Nightmares), 2007, video still, courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery (Amsterdam) and Foksal Gallery Foundation (Warsaw)

**3** \_ Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower), 2009, video still, courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery (Amsterdam) and Sommer Contemporary Art (Tel Aviv)

Production images

**5, 6, 7, 9** \_ Zamach (Assassination), 2011, production photo by Marcin Kalinski

**1** \_ Zamach (Assassination), 2011, production, photo by Yael Bartana

**8** \_ Pioneers of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (2), 2010, photo by Magda Wunsche © Samsel

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**The Polish Pavilion at the  
54<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Venice**

***...and Europe will be stunned***

***Yael Bartana***

**4 June – 27 November 2011**



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Pavilion Commissioner: Hanna Wróblewska  
Curators: Sebastian Cichocki, Galit Eilat  
Assistant Commissioner: Joanna Waśko

Exhibition design: Oren Sagiv  
Graphic design: Shual.com – Guy Saggee & Avihai Mizrahi  
Audio-Video: Eidotech

Organisation of the exhibition:  
Zachęta National Gallery of Art  
pl. Małachowskiego 3  
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[www.zacheta.art.pl](http://www.zacheta.art.pl)

Polish participation in the 54<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition in Venice was made possible through the financial support of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland.

The exhibition is organised in cooperation with the Adam Mickiewicz Insitute, the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts and Mondriaan Foundation.

The film was commissioned by Artangel, Outset Contemporary Art Fund, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture and Zachęta National Gallery of Art in association with Annet Gelink Gallery, Artis, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Ikon Gallery, Netherlands Film Fund, Sommer Contemporary Art and produced by My-i Productions in association with Artangel.