

47m

Yael Bartana
Midnight

19.10.24
-18.1.25



Exhibition text

What if women ruled the world? – a question whose possible answers run like a common thread through the exhibition *Midnight* by artist Yael Bartana. As soon as you enter the space's lobby, one can listen to a conversation of an all-women government strategizing a response to an existential crisis.

Midnight asks how feminism can serve to bring about cross-cultural coexistence in a time of crisis. In the video works *Two Minutes to Midnight* (2021) and *Mir Zaynen Do! (We are Here!)* (2024), different aspects of feminist ideas of intersectionality become evident. These ideas serve as the starting point for the supporting program, which illuminates the feminist roots of the city in the context of the present. Perhaps the Leipzig feminists also asked themselves this initial question – *What if women ruled the world?* – when they laid the foundations for Germany's first emancipatory wave between the 16th and 19th of October 1865 with the founding of the General German Women's Association ("Allgemeiner Deutschen Frauenverein (ADF)"). Their leaders Henriette Goldschmidt, Luise Otto-Peters

and Auguste Schmidt contrasted the male, warlike and antisemitic memory of the Battle of the Nations with the feminist future perspective of the “Battle of Women“, which vehemently opposed this marginalizing culture of remembrance. In this “future workshop” of 1865, they developed the feminist path of peaceful, interdenominational coexistence for the attainment of human rights – an image that can also be found in abstract form in Bartana’s works. Associations with the mentioned video work *Two Minutes to Midnight* become evident here. *Midnight* celebrates its efforts with the opening on the 159th anniversary of the “Battle of Women“. In the supporting program the exhibition creates a modern form of the “future workshop” in 1865. The exhibition will close also literally ‘two minutes to midnight’ during the week of Rosa Luxemburg’s murder.

The historical perspective clicks together with Bartana’s practice, what she describes as historical *pre-enactment*. *Pre-enactment* is a method for creating imagined visions of the future that focus on the acute search for collective possibilities for action. This practice uncovers the layers of the present and the past and explore the possibilities of events and realities that have not yet materialized. “Midnight” therefore refers to the present moment of multiple global crises. The “Doomsday Clock“, a symbolic barometer for the threat of global catastrophes, originally coined in 1947 by the “Bulletin of Atomic Scientists”, no longer stands at two minutes to twelve, but strikes on the hour: global wars and numerous genocides, the physical and psychological exploitation of women and queer bodies, a global shift to the right, pervasive racism and the ongoing destruction of our planet, darken the current political situation at midnight. The only way to reverse this crisis seems to be through scenarios imagined in the present moment in which the formation of alliances and collective action can succeed in realigning the future.

Midnight is a wake-up call to listen, an appeal to shape the future together – a departure from the diffuse description of problems in social networks, and towards problem solving through societal collectivity.

In her work, Yael Bartana (*1970, Israel) deals with socio-political issues ranging from individual and collective identity and historiography to the construction of national narratives. In her multimedia work of films, photographs, installations, performances and public monuments, she examines and questions cultural rituals and investigates their influence on identity and national myths. Bartana’s work has been exhibited internationally, including the GL Strand Copenhagen (2024), the Jewish Museum Berlin (2021), the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2020), the Berlin Biennale (2012), La Biennale di Venezia - 54th International Art Exhibition/Polish Pavilion (2011) and Documenta 12, Kassel (2007). She won the Artes Mundi 4 Prize (2010) and her trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* was recognised as the ninth most important work of art of the 21st century by The

Guardian newspaper in 2019. Yael Bartana was also awarded the Rome Prize Villa Massimo 2023/24 and is currently exhibiting in the German pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale together with Ersan Mondtag. She is represented in the collections of numerous museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Tate Modern, London; the Centre Pompidou, Paris and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Bartana lives and works in Berlin and Amsterdam.

Text by Tom Schremmer and Janika Jähnisch

Works in the exhibition

1. Mir Zaynen Do! (We are Here), one-channel video, 11:33 minutes, 2024



Credits: Production Photos Pablo Saborido

The exhibition opens in the lower hall with the sound and video work *Mir Zaynen Do! (We are Here)*. In this work, Bartana brings together two groups at São Paulo's Casa do Povo: Coral Tradição, a Yiddish choir preserving the memory of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and Ilú Obá De Min, an Afro-Brazilian percussion ensemble rooted in the Candomblé religion and Quilombismo. Despite their distinct cultural backgrounds, both groups share experiences of diaspora, resistance, and survival. Bartana stages a powerful musical and visual dialogue between these communities, filmed at the legendary Teatro de Arte Israelita Brasileiro (TAIB), a space charged with the history of São Paulo's Jewish and experimental arts scenes. The coming together of the two groups is an alliance of different origins, languages and rhythms. Collective choreographies create connections between past and present in the work.

2. Two Minutes to Midnight, one-channel video, 47:15 minutes, 2021



Credits: Yael Bartana, *Two Minutes to Midnight*, 2021, performance still, photo by Birgit Kaulfuß

The video work *Two Minutes to Midnight* (2021) is staged in the upper Kuppelsaal. In the video work, an all-female government attempts to avert an imminent nuclear threat from a foreign nation. Once again, it poses the question: What if women ruled the world? A panel of fictional characters and real-life female experts from the fields of defense, law, politics and psychology find themselves in a democratic “peace room”, which quotes the “war room” from Stanley Kubrick’s satirical film “*Dr. Strangelove*”. *Two Minutes to Midnight* is the result of a four-year interdisciplinary process that analyzes geopolitical power structures and presents us with an alternative to the usual political discourse. The film material comes from the recordings of the hybrid-experimental live performance *What if Women Ruled the World?* in Aarhus and Berlin (2017 and 2018) and the performance *Bury Our Weapons Not Our Bodies* in Philadelphia (2019).

3. Utopia Now!, Neon

Following her broader exploration of speculative futures and collective imagination, Yael Bartana's neon work, *Utopia Now!* proposes future events that may become historical realities. Her oeuvre often merges elements of utopia and dystopia, using pseudo-historical scenarios to chart new paths into the future. By connecting the concept of utopia with messianism, a recurring motif in her art, Bartana suggests that the pursuit of individual and collective salvation mirrors the messianic promise of redemption. In a world still grappling with its past, her work addresses themes of national identity, religious mysticism, and collective traumas in order to reconsider the possibilities for utopian futures.