
THE BOX

May 1–31, 2013

Yael Bartana

Mary Koszmary (2007)



Image courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam and Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw

To complement the exhibition of Shimon Attie's *MetroPAL.IS* in the galleries (May 4–August 4), the Box is featuring artists from the Middle East whose work also deals with the layered and complicated subjects of cultural identity and nationalism.

Mary Koszmary is the first in a trilogy of films that Israeli-born artist Yael Bartana made in Poland between 2007 and 2011. The trilogy, *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, documents the rise and activities of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), a quasi-fictitious political group founded by Bartana in 2007. The group's mission? The return of 3,300,000 Jews to Poland, the land of their ancestors.

Using two Polish words for the title that both mean nightmares, but which also sound like someone's name, *Mary Koszmary* is styled and structured to feel like a World War II propaganda film. The entire trilogy takes its cues from this filmmaking genre, and the artist cites German director Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* as direct influences. The film is set in Warsaw's *Stadion Dziesięciolecia* (also known as the 10th Anniversary Stadium), which carries the unfortunate history of both celebrating 10 years of communism in Poland and being built with rubble from the 1944 Warsaw Uprising.* The crumbling relic, empty and overgrown with weeds, plays host to the inaugural speech of Sławomir Sierakowski, the fictitious leader of the JRMiP, who also happens to be a real-life Polish leftist and activist. Emerging from the shadows and looking completely out of time in a long black leather coat and red necktie, Sierakowski takes the stage and begins: "Jews! Fellow countrymen! People. PEOPLE!" The speech that follows veers between propaganda and poetry with Sierakowski invoking a metaphorical Yiddish mother, Rifka, who lives with nightmares of the past and

waits for her children to return to her. Bartana doesn't have the swooning rapturous crowds that Riefenstahl used to build her *mise-en-scene*, but she uses emptiness in much the same way, strategically cutting away to the weed-filled stands to convey the monumental absence. The impassioned words echo throughout the abandoned stadium while a group of uniformly school-age boys and girls work diligently to stencil the center of the field with the words, "3,300,000 Jews can change the life of 40,000,000 Poles."

In truth, the loss of the more than three million Jews who lived in Poland before the WWII *did* change the country, but not for the better. Ironically, Poland's history of being invaded, occupied, and partitioned rivals that of Palestine, and the decades of xenophobic, Soviet-imposed communist rule that followed the war left the country a shell of what it once was. Almost twenty years after the country achieved independence, Sierakowski asks "Who will pull Poland out of the mire, so that it doesn't sink?" The wounds of the past run deep on both sides, but Sierakowski promises the Jewish people, "Heal our wounds and you'll heal yours. And we will be together again." The notion of a mass reverse exodus of Jews to Poland seems far-fetched, and Bartana acknowledges that the work shouldn't necessarily be taken literally. In a recent interview in *Art in America* she clarifies, "I'm more interested in political imagination, how one can politically imagine different realities."

Sierakowski's (and Bartana's) utopian vision challenges nationalistic tendencies, the meaning of homeland, and the entire Zionist movement. Their message urging Poland to find strength in difference and diversity is one that could just as easily be directed at Israel or the United States or the entire European Union. It's interesting to imagine what Poland would be like if it were, as it once was, a multicultural country with a vital population of Jews. Bartana doesn't suggest we forget the past. She only prompts us to imagine the potential for a different future.

*With one language, we cannot speak.
With one religion, we cannot listen.
With one color, we cannot see.
With one culture, we cannot feel.*

Jennifer Lange
Curator, Film/Video Studio Program

* The stadium was demolished in 2008 and a new National Stadium was built in its place in 2011.

Yael Bartana
Mary Koszmary (2007)
11 mins., Super-16 film transferred to video
Courtesy of the artist

Yael Bartana was born in 1970 in Kfar Yehezkel, Israel. She lives and works in Tel-Aviv and Amsterdam.

Wexner Center for the Arts
The Ohio State University