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LAND AND LOSS:
Yael BARTANA



REVOLUTIONARY TOURISM: LAND, LABOR, AND LOSS IN Yael BARTANA'S *SUMMER CAMP*

TEXT / NOAH SIMBLIST

This is a story about a place—a home, to be precise—built out of exile, destroyed by refugees, and built once again by outsiders. It is a Palestinian home, rebuilt in a town just outside of Jerusalem. This home is an abstract place, barely real in any functional sense, and erected on land whose relationship to real time is tenuous at best. Here, as the poet Yehuda Amichai has remarked, the air is so heavy with history that it is difficult to breathe. As a result, this story crisscrosses various wars, religions, politics, and ideologies. Even though it is the story of a house, plain and simple, Yael Bartana's video installation *Summer Camp*, 2007, is also a layered allegory.

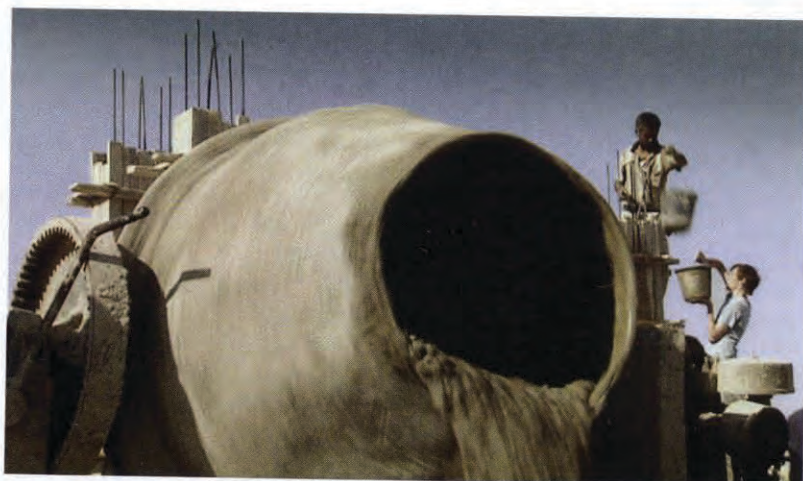
Summer Camp is about storytelling. It tracks the building of a house and the evolution of a symbol of resistance simultaneously. Its cast of characters includes Zionist pioneers, Palestinian activists, Spanish Communists, vegan anarchists, Yemenite Black Panthers, and Yehuda Shaul, an Israeli soldier who is ashamed of his actions.

In its original version, *Summer Camp* combines footage of international activists rebuilding this demolished home in 2006 with the soundtrack from Helmar Lerski's 1935 Zionist propaganda film, *Avodah*.¹ Bartana, a native Israeli Jew, shot ten days of footage at a "summer camp" run by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), where Israelis, Palestinians, and activists from other countries rebuilt homes demolished by Israeli authorities.

About 18,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished since 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the Six Day War. In East Jerusalem alone, there are currently about 22,000 demolition orders on Palestinian houses. These demolitions are usually justified by the fact that the homes were built without permits. But the Israeli government, seeking to prevent the settlement or curtail the expansion of the Palestinian population, rarely issues such permits. As a result, many Palestinians build illegally out of sheer necessity.

What can one house—or even the dozens of houses that ICAHD has built over the past few years—do in the face of such incredible odds? In a functional sense, not very much. But the impetus lies elsewhere. The reconstruction of these houses is a symbolic act of civil disobedience and resistance to the occupation through direct action.

What's more, these acts of resistance hinge on labor, which connects early Zionism to ICAHD's brand of pro-Palestinian



PAGE 1, OPPOSITE + ABOVE: Yael Bartana, stills from *Summer Camp*, 2007, single-channel video and sound installation, 12 minutes (courtesy of the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam)



activism—as Bartana makes apparent. Zionism, which emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth century, was deeply influenced by socialism. The first waves of Jewish immigrants to Palestine were secular young European and Russian idealists who sought to use their hands and bodies to work the land. They were guided by a vision of the new Jew: strong, muscular men and women of action who would replace the image of the weak, bookish victim of anti-Semitism.

The relationship to the land of Israel was central to this new vision. Though not explicitly religious, the mythic status of this land was pivotal. Combined with the socialist, romanticized vision of both landscape and labor, it provided fertile ground for a kind of secular modern messianism.

Similarly, Palestinian culture's connection to both land and labor runs very deep. The lemon, fig, pomegranate, and olive trees surrounding Palestinian homes bear folkloric weight. The land nourishes these trees, which in turn nour-

ish the families that tend to them. Passed down from generation to generation, land is thus deeply connected to family. When a young man marries, he often builds his new family's home on his father's land. This cultural practice is the foundation of Palestinian nationalism.

Ironically, despite their deep connection to the land of Palestine/Israel, both Jewish and Palestinian identities are inherently defined by homelessness. After the Romans' destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD, Jews wandered the world as outcasts and second-class citizens, to eventually settle mostly in Russia, Europe and the Middle East. Similarly, many Palestinians have been in exile since the *Nakba*—literally translated as “the catastrophe,” referring to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Indeed, both Palestinian and Jewish identities are fraught with tensions between homeland and diaspora.

W.J.T. Mitchell has written that “landscape is a medium of exchange between the human

and the natural, the self and the other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value.”² If the landscape's agency as an intermediary between the human and the natural always already depletes it of its use value, its symbolic mediation between the human and the divine compounds this abstraction exponentially. While numerous economic, nationalist, and ecological ideologies surge like vectors across the Holy Land, the theological dimension holds great power for Jewish Israelis as well as Muslim and Christian Palestinians.

When Bartana zooms in on hands scraping through the dusty earth of Palestine, she is fully aware of the significance of this earth. This is the land that Jews believe was promised to them as a covenant with God. This is the land where Jesus was born and crucified. This is the land that Mohammed left when he ascended to heaven.

Summer Camp opens with a slow pan of a rocky barren landscape. As the camera hovers





over dusty cypress and olive trees, it comes upon rubber tubing, twisted rebar, and torn pieces of fabric visible through the rubble. Strings and pounding drums ominously alert us that this rubble is something more than it seems. The next shot makes the dialectical subtext very clear: a bulldozer and an Arab man on a donkey.

A distant shot of soldiers hovering around a jeep gives way to the scraping of dirt and rubble into buckets. Hoes gather stones. Groups of workers organize into chains, handing bricks to one another. Wood is hauled and nailed together. The soundtrack's quick staccato accompanies the rapid visual montage.

A hulking man dressed like a classic kibbutznik sweats in the harsh summer sun. A cement mixer turns. Columns are poured and the walls are built one by one. More cement is mixed and

the ceiling is added. Workers shovel the cement into buckets and pass them to others.

There are closeups of Arab faces, smoking and drinking tea with cement-covered hands. The music slows as the camera zooms in on olives in the nearby trees, swaying in the wind. It is dusk and kids sit and play on nearby rubble. A man pulls a donkey up a hill in the darkening light. The house is complete and we can see a warm glow through the window. A silhouette approaches and closes the shades. On a distant road, a military jeep drives away down the hill.

Bartana's video consciously tries to take an objective stance. By distancing itself from the particular details of the characters of this story, it allows the narrative to operate on an archetypal level, much like the Zionist propaganda film *Avodah* that she sought to emulate.

In this, she foregrounds another irony: toiling in the land, the anti-Zionist group acts in much the same way as early Zionist propagandists, despite their different political position. Here, the construction process itself is a kind of propaganda, a spectacle performed to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian community. More importantly, this performance is self-consciously promoted to the international press to shed light on the practice of housing demolitions while putting forward a model of Israeli-Palestinian nonviolent cooperation. Journalists from Norway, Finland, Italy, Israel, the UK, and Russia reported on the 2008 ICAHD summer camps.

This gives way to another question: is the pro-Palestinian propaganda as universalizing, utopian, and ultimately problematic as its Zionist cousin? Is Bartana's objective stance an

OPPOSITE: still from *Summer Camp*, 2007; ABOVE: destroyed Palestinian home in Anata (photo: Noah Simblist)



effort to avoid the propaganda potential of any representation of land and architecture in Israel/Palestine? Can anyone avoid ideological positions altogether? The individual, subjective stories of the volunteers involved in the summer camps, in 2006 and in 2008, provide interesting perspectives on these questions.³

Neutrality is a myth: no neutral position exists—be it in film or in real life. The artist and her camera, the performers, and we—the spectators—all play political roles within the narrative. Indeed, in the case of ICAHD's summer camp, the spectator resides inside the narrative as well, as the performers enact their politics for each other.

ICAHD structures its building camps to include both practice and theory. In addition to the actual construction, there are lectures by groups such as Anarchists Against the Wall, in opposition to the barrier built by Israel roughly along the border of the green line, *Breaking the Silence*, a group of retired Israeli soldiers formerly deployed in the occupied territories who tell stories of the abuse of Palestinians under occupation, *B'Tselem*, which describes itself as "The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories." These lectures often become catalysts for discussions and debates among the volunteers.

At one of these events, Yehuda Shaul, a young Israeli military veteran, gave a presentation about *Breaking the Silence's* work. In the process, he described some of the shameful actions he

carried out as a soldier in Hebron, including the use of Palestinian children as human shields, random searches and seizures, and the eviction of Palestinians from their homes in order to use their roofs as observation posts.

This year, many of the volunteers were members of a delegation sent by the Spanish Communist Party. Among them were two women of Palestinian heritage. One member of this group compared Shaul to a Nazi confronting Holocaust survivors. The Spanish man went on to declare that Israel was a terrorist state. Since most Israeli citizens are conscripted into the army, they are terrorists. As such, ICAHD's mission and program could not stop the violence against Palestinians. For him, the only possible mode of resistance was street-level revolutionary protest.

This discussion created a great deal of disagreement inside the Spanish delegation and between ICAHD volunteers. Ultimately, it revealed the Left's competing visions and strategies to work on behalf of the Palestinian struggle for human rights and nationhood.

This speaks to yet another irony in Bartana's video installation. Both the Israeli pioneers and the contemporary pro-Palestinian activists identify with leftist politics. Her juxtaposition of these two opposite political viewpoints amounts to more than a mere equation: she is also framing some of the contradictions and tensions that have shaped the Left over the past sixty years.

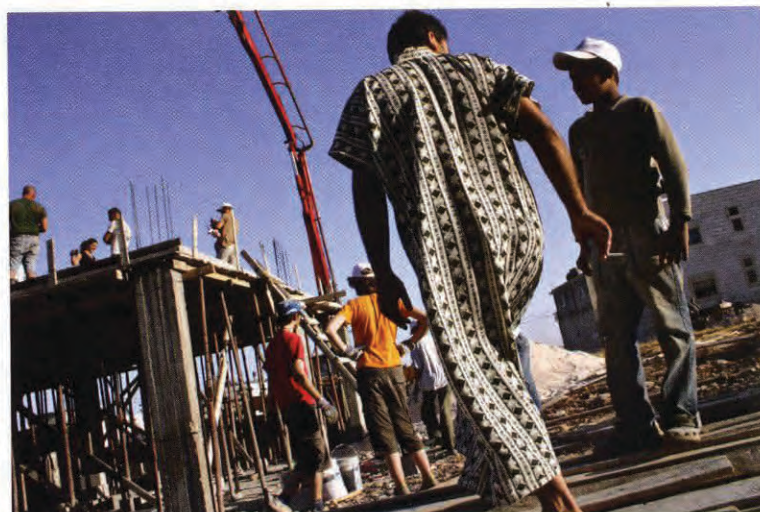
If we define the Left as a political position that

advocates for all victims of power's discriminatory exercise, we might be able to hold both of these viewpoints as consistent. But are we not straying a little too far from the class imperative of the old Left? Is the power at play in Palestine/Israel based on class, as traditional leftist positions like Marxism would require? Should the Left respond—or rather, is it able to respond—to the machinations of power rooted in race, nationalism, and colonialism?

Depending on the narrative we choose, there are different victims—in both Zionism's early stages and in the current conflict. The foundational Zionist story involves the flight of the Jewish victim from Russian pogroms and the Holocaust. By contrast, the classic Palestinian story features Western Jewish colonial invaders forcing Palestinians from their homes. The exclusive, purist dimension of Zionist and Palestinian nationalisms requires one-dimensional representations. As such, the singular victim is made to conflate race and class. Yet, there is truth to both stories, which makes the assignment of exclusive victimhood an impossible mission.

The Spaniard who rushed to compare the Israeli soldier to a Nazi was looking for absolute positions of power—good and evil—a vision consistent with the utopian purities of a particular kind of grand leftist narrative. However, if we are willing to consider identity in a multivalent way, hybridity reveals itself as a more productive model because it disavows the purities of utopia

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: destroyed Palestinian home in Anata; ICAHD rebuilding in Anata, summer 2008 (photos: Noah Simblist)



and disables its potential for universalizing claims to truth.

An event at a vegan anarchist center, held on the first day of this summer camp, speaks to the power of hybrid identities to confound the purities of utopian positions. ICAHD's orientation for the summer camp coincided with a meeting of the Israeli Black Panthers. Formed in the 1970s, this group works on behalf of the Arab-Jew minority, immigrants from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Morocco or Yemen.⁴ Jeff Halper, ICAHD's director, invited them to join forces with his organization to fight the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Could that not be expected of fellow leftists fighting for the underclass? The Black Panthers responded angrily that, first, he should visit Sderot, a Mizrahi town that has been pummeled by Qasam rockets from Gaza.⁵ The Ashkenazi power elite has ignored the population of Sderot, they argued, because they consider the Mizrahi population expendable.⁶

In his 1983 book, *In the Land of Israel*, Amos Oz relates a conversation with a group of Mizrahi men at a coffee shop. The Intifada has not yet begun, but they are talking about Palestinians. One man says, "if they don't go after those Arabs they'll go after us, the Jewish Arabs," implying that it was a matter of self-defense to stoke hatred for Palestinian Arabs.

How can the Left hop so swiftly in the defense of one oppressed people after another without an investment in their culture or an understand-

ing of their histories? How can a leftist fight for the rights of Jews against an anti-Semitic world one day and then scream bloody murder when these same Jews, now recast as the racist fascists, are murdering innocent Palestinians? What are we to make of the leftist Jews, former members of the exiled underclass, who used labor and socialism to define themselves as new revolutionary Zionist subjects while ignoring the basic human rights of the Palestinians whom they themselves exiled, murdered, and cast into squalor for their own material and cultural needs?

This is the story of the clash of utopias: Zionism—be it Ashkenazi or Mizrahi, secular or religious—and Palestinian nationalism—be it Hamas' Islamic religious brand or Fatah's more secular form. The drama lies in the folding of two autonomous narratives into one another, when two ideologies infect the clarity of each other's timeless, universal notions of good and evil.

Summer Camp parallels the stories of two nationalisms. As a result, it deconstructs them, turning them into a hybrid form that splits from their original utopian propaganda and turns their narratives into something more real, layered, and complex.

NOTES

1. A different version of *Summer Camp* on view at P.S.1 includes a remastered and re-edited version of Helmar Lerski's 1935 film, *Avodah*. The duration of both films is identical. They are also projected on opposite sides of an opaque screen located in the center of the room, effectively distributing the audience on either side.
2. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 5.
3. The author was amongst these participants.
4. Taking inspiration from the African-American Black Panthers, the Israeli group sought to fight against the racism and persecution of Mizrahi Israeli Jews enacted by their European Jewish counterparts.
5. The term Mizrahi—which literally means "Eastern" Jews—refers to Jews from Arab countries.
6. The term Ashkenazi—which literally means "German" Jews—refers to Jews from Europe and Russia.

Noah Simblist is an artist, writer and Assistant Professor of Art at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. His work explores the political role of the artist, the history of abstraction, and the ideas of home, border, and exile in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.