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Olivia Gauthier, "ArtSeen: Witch Hunt," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 1, 2022.

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

Witch Hunt

By **Olivia Gauthier**



Yael Bartana, *What if Women Ruled the World?*, 2017. Performance view, Filmby Aarhus, European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017, Denmark. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Brigit Kaufuss.

ON VIEW

Hammer Museum & ICA
October 10, 2021 – January 9, 2022
Los Angeles

Presented at The Hammer Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, *Witch Hunt* organized by curators Connie Butler and Anne Ellegood showcases the work of 16 female-identified artists across varying mediums and from a global lens. Representing 13 different countries, the 15

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projects in the two-pronged exhibition probe and expand what feminist art looks like and what questions it asks, while highlighting the significance of performance and video-based work in feminist art practice. Beyond the bounds of second-wave feminism—there are no references to housework, the kitchen, childcare—the artists in this exhibition look far beyond the home as a political landscape, though the body is ever-present and implied as ripe political ground. Instead, the artists in *Witch Hunt* propose broader perspectives and methods of making work that pushes the viewer to question and take account of hegemonic value systems, patriarchal and Euro-centric power structures.

The impetus for *Witch Hunt* was the 2016 election and the former reality show host and president’s blatant misogynistic rhetoric and behavior, the visibility of which was as incredulous as it was alarming, and shed wool from the eyes of many who had been optimistic about a possible female leader. Taking its name from the historically gendered term referencing the mass execution of women during the Middle Ages, the title of the show is a direct jab at Donald Trump’s manipulation of the term to position himself as the victim. The exhibition catalog states his usage of the term on Twitter at an astounding number, over 350 times. Viewing the exhibition in our current context, there is an imbued sense of urgency to speak directly to the violence of such regimes globally. Many of the artists in the exhibition use varying forms of performance and video that implicate the vulnerability and resistance of the body to such oppressive forces. *Witch Hunt* features the artists’ individual projects, some of which were commissioned, in such a way that they present as solo presentations rather than a sprawling group show; the exacting focus allows for a methodical approach to viewing, as each project is given ample space for contemplation. At the Hammer, Yael Bartana’s work, *Two Minutes to Midnight* (2021) is a 47-minute film, made for the exhibition, created from the footage of various recordings of her performance *What if Women Ruled the World?* (2018). One of the more directly “political” projects, Bartana’s work posits a fictional all-female-led country that is pointedly pacifist. In the film and the original performances, Bartana invited both female actors and legitimate experts in various related fields (defense advisers, strategists, politicians, etc.) to have a roundtable discussion to address the issue at hand—a breach in an international agreement regarding the use of nuclear weapons, which the matriarchal government is of course specifically against. At the roundtable, which directly references the war-room in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, the women debate what it means literally and symbolically to be a female-led government. When discussing possible responses to the nuclear attack, the women question what the purpose of their power as a female-run government is if they were to exact the same patriarchal violence in a direct attack—why would we fight for a different form of governance if we were to end up with the same conclusions as men?

Similarly direct in her approach to discussing poignant political issues through performance-based video is Candice Breitz’s work *TLDR* (2017) presented at ICA LA, a multichannel video installation based on interviews with a group of sex workers in Cape Town. The work is two-pronged: one room presents a multichannel video performance with the members of SWEAT (Sex Workers Education &

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Advocacy Taskforce), narrated by a twelve-year-old, and in an adjacent room are a series of individual interviews with the members of SWEAT discussing their politics and experiences as sex workers on individual video monitors. Taking on a contentious debate within feminist discourse, Breitz's project seeks to examine and extrude the ways in which white feminism, in hand with white saviorism and a penchant for celebrity trending clickbait politics, so often violently ignores and erases the lived experiences of people who seek basic human rights as sex workers. The narrator describes in detail the conflict between Amnesty International and a group of white self-proclaimed feminist Hollywood Actresses such as Lena Dunham, Kate Winslet, and Meryl Streep, who, along with anti-prostitution activists, called to end the effort to decriminalize sex work in a bid to posit sex work as inherently anti-feminist and being linked with sex trafficking. In the video, choreographed in a loose style of community theater, the narrator is flanked by a Greek chorus of SWEAT members who don protest signs pushing for "Decrim" (decriminalization), "white privilege" masks of the aforementioned celebrities, and a black cloaked figure with a skull face holding tribute signs of murdered sex workers, that all underscore the real urgency to decriminalize and protect sex workers.



Yael Bartana, *Patriarchy is History*, 2019. Neon, 78 1/8 x 72 15/16 inches. Courtesy the artist, Annet Gelink Gallery and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv. Photo: Tom Haartsen.

Also at ICA LA is Every Ocean Hughes's video *One Big Bag* (2021). Performed by Lindsay Rico, the video records a 38-minute-long monologue written by the artist describing a "mobile corpse kit" used by death doulas. While cutting down objects such as makeup and pad from strings they are hung by, Rico discusses the importance of tending to and honoring the dead, especially those whose bodies are not typically venerated in the eyes of patriarchal society. In the performance, Rico

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discusses rituals of death from the after-effects of the body to negotiating the presentation of the deceased if there is no will and no family to vouch for them, particularly through the lens of queer folks. In caring for the dead, Hughes's script highlights the ways in which patriarchy has determined how death is typically handled and posits death doulas as counteracting systems which favor heteronormative family units. Based on five years of research focusing on death and its rituals, Hughes's work proposes a queering of customs and practices honoring the dead. Rather than hiding the process of preparing a body for burial, Rico's performance is frank and explicit about the details of caring for the recently deceased and honoring their physical form as they transition from the "alive side," as Hughes refers to it.

There is nothing stereotypically "feminist" or "feminine" about the works in the exhibition in terms of aesthetics; instead, what is proposed as "feminist" is their shared project to upend and reinvent strategies of resistance in the wake of a persistently misogynistic and bigoted global political landscape. Both the artists and their subjects are decidedly not strictly cis-women; rather the curators have argued for the continued relevance of feminism by highlighting its multiplicities and intersectionalities across issues of race, gender, social class, and sexuality. Witch Hunt proposes an inclusive feminism that spans the gamut of contemporary art practice in terms of subject matter, material, and form, and the artists here present a strong argument for feminist methods of art-making as a continued resistance to entrenched patriarchy. As Yael Bartana's 2019 neon says: "Patriarchy is History"—and hopefully it will be.

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<https://brooklynrail.org/2022/02/artseen/Witch-Hunt>