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TO GIVE THINGS A NAME

SIRAH FOIGHEL BRUTMANN & EITAN EFRAT



Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat, *Tristram's Starling on a ruin near the Dead Sea*, courtesy the artists

SIRAH FOIGHEL BRUTMANN & EITAN EFRAT

What's in a name? When Chantal Akerman opens her last film, *No Home Movie* (2015), with an extended shot of a tree in the desert, she doesn't give the place a name. She films a generic desert; it could be anywhere. Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat recognise the place and retrace Akerman's journey, from Brussels to Israel, to film the same desert and give it a name: al-Naqab. It's the beginning of 'Là', the duo's exhibition in S.M.A.K.

Akerman has a thing for names. The title of her last film can be read in more than one way. As 'not a home movie': ironic, for a film that takes place almost entirely in an apartment, the home of her mother. When in fact the film is about the absence of a home: a 'no-home film'. In this reading, it is about the house of the mother who dies shortly after the filming of *No Home Movie* (and shortly before the moment when Akerman chooses to step out of this life). Then it becomes a film as a summation of a body of work — Akerman's — in which each film unfolds as a dialogue with the mother and the importance she attaches to the home, against which Akerman has always rebelled.

The title of Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat's exhibition can also be read in multiple languages with multiple meanings. *Là* means 'there' in French, 'no' in Arabic, 'for her' in Hebrew. Those languages stand for the different places through which the exhibition moves: the French of Brussels, the city where Akerman was born in 1950 and where Brutmann and Efrat came to live around the turn of the century; the Arabic of the Palestinians who at this moment are again virtually being pushed back into the sea as a result of the war in Gaza; the Hebrew of Israel, the country where Brutmann and Efrat grew up and where Akerman travels as an uncomfortable tourist.

Here and there

It goes from here to there. Like when Brutmann and Efrat decided to come to Brussels. She, for a dance course at P.A.R.T.S.; he, first via the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and then to Brussels for an additional master's programme at erg, the French-language art school where he and Brutmann teach together.

That movement — from there to here, from here to there — runs like a thread through their work. In their first two films they use photographs taken by Brutmann's father, the photojournalist who, after working in Israel/Palestine, fills his film rolls with images of life at home (in *Printed Matter*, 2011) or takes pictures of prominent foreign guests in front of the same photo of Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz in the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem (in *Journal*, 2011).

It is also present in the first two films of their trilogy *The Gathering Series*, for which they film two monuments designed by the Israeli architect Dani Karavan, in Tel Aviv and Portbou. So it went, from one side of the Mediterranean to the other, from Israel to the Spanish Pyrenees. With both films it was a matter of focusing and turning the gaze. It was about looking behind and below the monument to Tel Aviv's founders (in *Orientation*, 2015). Then they come across what remains of the Palestinian village Salame (behind) and the hill on which the village's Palestinian residents grew their watermelons (below). Then, from the Palestinian past behind and below the monument to the founders of Tel Aviv, it went (in *Nude Descending a Staircase*, 2015) to the future behind the monument to Walter Benjamin in Portbou, the Spanish border town where the German Jewish philosopher ends his life at the end of the Second World War, on the run from the Nazi's. That future is the stream of Benjamin tourists who find their way from the station to the monument today, and whose YouTube videos Brutmann and Efrat use in their work.

The Gathering Series was about what unites, connects, but also about the loss, the mourning that comes with it. That became clear in the third film, *Memoir Séb. Fragile!* (2017), made from pieces of film left behind by their friend and cameraman, Sébastien Koeppel, who died too young. This is what connects: mourning the loss of a Palestinian village, of a Jewish philosopher, of a dear friend.



Installation view Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat, 'Là', 2024, S.M.A.K., Ghent, © Dirk Pauwels

Mourning

This sense of loss, of shared mourning, is also what connects both artists with Chantal Akerman. This is the starting point of 'Là' in S.M.A.K, which is also where my conversation with the artists begins.

They tell me about the history they share with Akerman. They talk about Akerman's pain, about how she, depressed, films through the slits in her closed curtains from a room in Tel Aviv in *Là-bas* (2006). The pain that leads back to an intergenerational trauma, of children (Akerman) and grandchildren (Brutmann and Efrat) of Jewish Holocaust victims and survivors. They talk about the duty to mourn (for Akerman) and the question of how long we will mourn (for the victims of the Israeli invasion of Gaza). They talk about the works in terms of absence, of what is not there, of the past, duration, in which speaking itself becomes absent, like a ghost.

They call it 'Unlearning Zionism'. They talk about the discomfort, the unease that arises in grief, in mourning. They are inspired by Derrida's work around mourning. By the act of speaking one's concern in and through the language of the other. It's there that they find inspiration for all the languages in their exhibition, which opens with *Un Âne*, a video letter to Akerman in her French, and continues with *Anan* (that's Hebrew for 'cloud'), another video letter to Akerman in Yiddish.

Language makes communication possible but at the same time also limits it. It's as if we live comfortably in the same language that also imprisons us. This exhibition evolves from French (Akerman's) to Yiddish (of the ancestors), through English (the international lingua franca) before arriving at Hebrew, the language that they speak with their own children at home in Brussels. You are always already speaking the language of the other.

If language here is like a home/house, then the home/house also becomes a part of language. It's there in the language of the film, of the light, of ways of seeing and looking. They reorientate the camera and name the place where Akerman filmed. They know it as a place of violence, where only a tenth of the more than one hundred thousand Bedouin who lived there before 1948 remain. Where even the remaining Bedouin are still being driven

deeper into the desert. They follow the dead-end path along which Akerman filmed, passing a Jewish settlement, an artificial oasis where the water that the Bedouin have been forced to forego is used to sprinkle trees and fill swimming pools. They talk about how the Bedouin experience of the Nakba was completely different from that of other Palestinians. How the Bedouin were pushed back into semi-urban areas. And they talk about the recordings that they made there in the winter of 2022, long before the catastrophe in Gaza that began on 7 October 2023 with the attack on the villages and the music festival near the wall that surrounds the Gaza Strip.

Tourist

Akerman didn't just follow in the footsteps of the tourists. She also filmed with the gaze of a tourist. The touristic gaze is a fleeting gaze, a gaze lacking all reciprocity. A gaze that reduces every swimming pool, every garden, every oasis to the same. A generic view of interchangeable places. She looks like a tourist, but she doesn't indulge in tourist-like behaviour. The only images Akerman didn't film from her car were filmed from the side of the road. Even there, she refuses to give in to the role of the tourist.

That idea of the refusal is very significant. Or of resistance. Although Brutmann and Efrat aren't convinced that this is a conscious decision on Akerman's part. It could also be fear, fear of what might happen if she stopped by the side of the road and went for a walk. Or, I propose, it has to do with a personal fear, stemming from a trauma, which Akerman also uses as material in films such as *Saute ma ville* (1968) or *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). Or simply, reply the artists, that she feels safe in the car, shielded from the elements. The car is no home, but it does provide a certain sense of security.

It's as if, they continue, in *Là-bas* and *No Home Movie* Akerman uses the camera to feel that she is alive. These are heavy films, made during dark periods of depression. Yet always one has the impression that she wants to persevere, wants to make herself feel that she is alive. It's different for Brutmann and Efrat. When they film, there's always already a projection into the future. Even while filming, they're already thinking about looking at the rushes, about the editing. That always provides a certain feeling of comfort. Filming may theoretically have much in common with reliving the past, but it is also a projection of the filmmakers into the future.



Installation view Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat, 'Là', 2024, S.M.A.K., Ghent, © Dirk Pauwels

Disruption

They use different cameras — a digital video camera and an analogue 16mm film camera. They want to achieve a sense of displacement. They edit between both formats to bring that feeling of instability into their work. This diversity of media also creates an ecological awareness, an experience of the environment that acts upon the images. They develop 16mm film on site with salt water from the Dead Sea. The screens on which they project are made of latex. These are material interventions that draw attention to the space of the film (the desert) and of the projection (the museum).

They are after a sense of imperfection. The latex screens are not ideal, they have too much texture, they move with the museum visitors who walk past them. These disruptions lend the screens a certain agency. And that is exactly the point. By developing the film on site with water that is too salty, they take something with them from their surroundings. It allows them to intervene in the production process.

It looks like a disturbance, a deformation — but it isn't. It goes further than that. It is a way of revealing the layered nature of what they see, rather than a path to an aesthetic judgment about the image at hand. It's not about the disruption, they say, but about the intervention — by the artists as well as by the environment, during the production as well as during the exhibition of the work. These different media also produce different aspect ratios, which need to be corrected in the projected image. According to them, even the effect of the salt on the developed film image shouldn't be called a disruption. They prefer to see it as a way in which the image resists.

Attunement

And then everything comes together in one big room. This work also has a name: *Là ensemble*. It's an ensemble, a collection of 16mm film projectors and latex screens of various sizes showing a variety of images of the desert. A collection, also, of different voices singing the note 'la' together. Herein lies another meaning of the title: la, the tuning note, used to bring all the instruments in an orchestra in line with each other pitch-wise. It is the note that gathers, that summons for deliberation, that appeals to unity in diversity.

There they sing the different meanings of *La*, over and over again, of anger and sorrow, of intervention. They insist on doing it together. Thus a community comes into being — in the act of protest, of giving oneself, of thinking about the places they want to work on together. And sometimes there's a black-out, a moment when all the projectors stop together, go quiet. Only to start up again. It takes a while for the 16mm projectors to get back up to speed and find to the right tone again.

Stopping — they all do it together. It's another disorientating moment. The silence. It carries so many meanings. It's the moment when Akerman decides to put an end to things. It's the moment when someone decides to come back. Back to the place you left from. It's the moment you notice who is standing next to you. Or when you no longer look at that blank screen as image but as solid matter. It's the moment to refocus. To re-tune.

Translated from the Dutch by Ezra Babski