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Cover image:

# Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat: Là

by Maria Walsh • 24.07.2024

Presented across five galleries at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent (SMAK), *Là* by the artist duo Sirah Foighel Brutmann (b.1983) and Eitan Efrat (b.1983) is a project of mourning – specifically of the Belgian film-maker Chantal Akerman, who took her own life in 2015. Taking inspiration from Jacques Derrida's eulogies in *The Work of Mourning* (2001) in which he 'speaks' to his deceased philosopher friends through their writings, Brutmann and Efrat's dialogue with Akerman, whom they never met, retraces the route she took across the Negev desert while shooting footage for *No Home Movie* (2015), which documented her mother's illness and subsequent death.

The exhibition title also references Akerman's *Là-Bas (Down There; 2006)*, in which the camera mainly focuses on a blind-covered window in her rented apartment on a visit to Tel Aviv. As the daughter of Holocaust survivors, Akerman's obscuring of the exterior can be understood in relation to her 'outsider' diasporic perspective on life in Israel. Brutmann and Efrat are also part of a Jewish diaspora, having migrated from Israel to Brussels, where they have lived for over twenty years. For those familiar with Akerman, Brutmann and Efrat's films will perhaps conflict with, as well as recall, the multiple 'Akermans' that are circulated in experimental cinema histories: feminist film-maker, lesbian film-maker, chronicler of Jewish migration and nomadic traveller of borderlands in general. However, as well as referencing Akerman, Brutmann and Efrat's exhibition has an autonomy of its own. *Là* is the artistic outcome of a process of unlearning Zionist imperialism, which – while being filtered through a critical meditation on Akerman's treatment of images of the desert in *No Home Movie* and her video installation *NOW* (2015) – extends beyond it.<sup>1</sup> Cinematically addressing geopolitical issues in Palestine and Israel, the exhibition is also concerned with film as material and medium.

Shown in separate galleries, *Un Âne (A Donkey)* **FIG.1**, and *[anan] (cloud; 2024)* are both short experimental documentary films, which deploy the epistolary form. This methodology is adopted by the artists in order to simultaneously honour Akerman and question her presentation of the desert as an empty, uninhabited terrain, given that such generic images of deserts feed settler colonial imaginaries of *terra nullius* (land belonging to nobody). The soundtracks include, as well as on-screen sound and music, audio of letters written by the artists and narrated by Brutmann. In *Un*

*Âne*, Brutmann reads in French – the language of the couple’s adopted homeland – whereas in [*anan*] she speaks in Yiddish, a language spoken by the ancestors of all three film-makers, which was largely rejected in favour of Hebrew in Israel. Akerman aficionados will immediately think of *News From Home* (1976), in which she voices in French the letters she received from her mother in Brussels while she was living in New York.<sup>2</sup> However, Brutmann and Efrat’s key references here are Akerman’s desert images in *No Home Movie*: one, a durational shot of a tree being buffeted by the wind; the other, a tracking sequence shot from a moving vehicle. Both, Brutmann’s voiceover informs us, functioned as counter-shots to the claustrophobia of Akerman’s mother’s apartment in Brussels.



Fig. 1 Still from *Un Âne (A Donkey)*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2023. Video and 16mm transferred to video, duration 12 minutes 33 seconds. (Courtesy the artists; exh. SMAK, Ghent).

In *Un Âne*, Brutmann and Efrat give the Negev desert its original Arabic name, al-Naqab, and document what Akerman kept out of the frame: the Palestinian Bedouin village of Al-Buqay‘ah. Unrecognised by the state of Israel, Al-Buqay‘ah continues to be inhabited after the mass displacements of the Indigenous population between 1948 and 1953. Whereas Akerman’s conflictual relationship to ‘down there’ is imbued with both the wariness and longing that are characteristic of second-generation diasporic subjects and intensified in Holocaust trauma narratives, Brutmann and Efrat’s retracing of her steps – from an equally respectful distance – captures the precarious remnants of Palestinian Bedouin livelihoods evident in the landscape. Rather than showing an empty desert ripe for the taking by colonial settlers, their camera focuses on the persistence of life evidenced by the village that is occluded from Akerman’s frame, as well as the plants, animals and humans that inhabit the region. Humans are only glimpsed at the edges of the frame or inferred through sound, except for one sequence in which an elderly camel shepherd, seated outside his car, plays haunting sounds on the rebab, a

Bedouin stringed instrument. There is also footage of a resort in the area where coachloads of tourists queue for camel rides **FIG.2**.

Initially, *Un Âne* seems to be a purely observational documentary, allowing the viewer time to consider the desert infrastructure, but the epistolary voice, which only emerges about 4 minutes before the end of the film, changes this. In precise poetic prose, it begins 'Dear Chantal', the tenor drenching everything that preceded it with grief. The viewer is told how, after seeing a white donkey reflecting the light of the sun, the film-makers wondered if it might be Akerman's spirit: 'we are left to negotiate your absence with a white donkey in a desert that can no longer stay generic'. Eventually, a donkey emerges from the shadows of dusk. The braying animal recalls Robert Bresson's classic *Au Hazard Balthazar* (1966), in which the titular donkey symbolises a kind of spiritual endurance. This is not Brutmann and Efrat's reference, although it can be related to their coded inference of the donkey as a symbol of Palestinian resistance and survival in the face of displacement. In Judaism, the donkey is also a loaded symbol; the narrated letter mentions that the Messiah is carried by a white donkey. However, rather than being explained in the film, the animal's multiple meanings are felt as an invitation to the viewer to find out more.



**Fig. 2** Installation view of Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat: *Lá* at SMAK, Ghent, 2024, showing *Un Âne (A Donkey)*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2023. Video and 16mm transferred to video, duration 12 minutes 33 seconds. (Courtesy SMAK, Ghent; photograph Dirk Pauwels).

The installation *Horizons* **FIG.3** consists of two elements: a slide show of eighty-one images shot during the trip **FIG.4**, some identifiable from *Un Âne*, which are projected onto a large latex screen, and a 16mm looped projection of typed text that scrolls downwards. The text is succinct and aerated, giving the viewer time to make connections between the erasure of Palestinian

Bedouin cultures and film as a degradable, mutable material. The images were developed on location in the al-Naqab desert using water from the Dead Sea. The blistering effects that appeared on the images **FIG.5** are given three possible explanations, including the high salinity of the water, which are detailed in the projected text. Resembling digitally enhanced special effects, these accidents are suggestive of portals into a different future. Underscoring what kind of future that might be, an adjacent gallery contains another slide show projecting the same image eighty-one times: a text scratched out on black film leader that reads 'Nobody's free until everybody's free'.<sup>3</sup>

The second epistolary film, *[anan]* **FIG.6**, further documents desert tourism, specifically the archaeological site of Masada, which is referred to in Brutmann's voiceover as a Zionist stronghold. The viewer is told of the site's symbolism, where two thousand years ago Jewish extremists are said to have died by mass suicide upon the approach of the Roman army. The letter goes on to observe that, with scant archaeological evidence, this myth of mass suicide is glorified. The letter also informs us that to the east of the site is the Dead Sea, while to the west lies the Gaza Strip. Rather than being verbose, Brutmann and Efrat are attentive to film's capacity for *photogénie*; that is, according to Jean Epstein, who developed the term, how film's capacity to add a technical animation to the movement that already exists in life exudes a spiritual dimension.<sup>4</sup>

Brutmann and Efrat's intense focus on singular trees and vegetation buffeted by high winds invokes this sensibility. Contrasting this cinematic romanticism, the gallery literature informs us that in this area 'trees imported by the British and Zionists from across the British Empire [...] are being irrigated from distant water sources', while Palestinian Bedouin villages lack access to water and other essential amenities.<sup>5</sup> *[anan]* also includes footage of the gates of the cemetery of Père-Lachaise, Paris, where Akerman is buried. Due to violent winds, the cemetery was closed when Brutmann and Efrat visited, but in their zoom-out from the closure notice on the imposing entrance, they perform a cinematic memorial to a film-maker, who often deployed zoom-outs as well as architectural features to prohibit access in her images. The voiceover letter announces in Yiddish: 'it is tormenting to mourn you when an intergenerational trauma is being created, again'.

The large-scale audio-visual installation *Là ensemble* **FIG.7** consists of eleven variously sized latex screens. Projected onto each is looped 16mm footage shot along route 3199, which Akerman took between Masada and Arad. The installation enacts a kind of cry of mourning for traumatic events. The room resounds with the optical sound of a continuous note – 'la' (A) – which the film-makers asked musicians to donate to the work, the layering of contributions making for a taut sonic experience. At one point, the

note drops, the screens go blank and the space resonates with sombre echoes of the now disappeared sound. In theory at least, mourning opens a space for something new: freedom perhaps?



**Fig. 3** Installation view of *Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat: Lá* at SMAK, Ghent, 2024, showing *Horizons*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2024. Slides and 16mm projection. (Courtesy SMAK, Ghent; photograph Dirk Pauwels).

A slightly older work, *Is It A Knife Because...* **FIG. 8** is presented off the main exhibition spaces. Using footage shot between 2009 and 2021 and compiled during lockdown, the film features the couple and their two children, Rita and Nilus, and explores the close proximity of parenting and film-making in a confined domestic space. It is revealing that the credits acknowledge Dani and Sheilah ReStack, another artistic duo whose work incorporates parenting and domesticity. Charming on occasion, the film does not shy away from questioning the camera as a mode of interpellation by which children are encultured into societal mores of surveillance. The view from the window of their flat looks into the police station opposite, a pin-up calendar of scantily clad models looming above the officers on duty. As Efrat's camera hones in on this view, the voiceover dialogue between Efrat and one of the children gently probes the power relations encoded in seeing.

In the film, the camera mediates between parents and children as well as between the state and forms of protest. However, while containing themes that generally pertain to Akerman – such as domesticity, confinement in rooms and an analysis of the camera as a window onto the world – *Lá*'s intense focus on the contested terrain of the desert in Israel and Palestine is lost here. Whereas Akerman closed the shutters on the dispossession of Palestinian lives and refused to open the blinds on Israeli life outside her window in Tel Aviv, Brutmann and Efrat's films move fluidly between prohibition and naming – a positionality that is perhaps

only available to a generation at one remove from Akerman. In their dialogue with the film-maker, saying no to silence and occlusion is imperative, but *Là* also makes space for the mourning that there is no time for in political activism or in the midst of the killing fields.



**Fig. 4** Slide from *Horizons*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2024. Slides and 16mm projection. (Courtesy the artists; exh. SMAK, Ghent).



**Fig. 5** Slide from *Horizons*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2024. Slides and 16mm projection. (Courtesy the artists; exh. SMAK, Ghent).





**Fig. 6** Installation view of *Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat: Lá* at SMAK, Ghent, 2024, showing *[anan] (cloud)*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2024. Video and 16mm transferred to video, duration 10 minutes 44 seconds. (Courtesy SMAK, Ghent; photograph Dirk Pauwels).



**Fig. 7** Installation view of *Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat: Lá* at SMAK, Ghent, 2024, showing *Lá ensemble*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2024. 16mm projectors and latex screens, dimensions variable. (Courtesy SMAK, Ghent; photograph Dirk Pauwels).



**Fig. 8** Installation view of *Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat: Là* at SMAK, Ghent, 2024, showing *Is It A Knife Because...*, by Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat. 2022. Video, duration 25 minutes 46 seconds. (Courtesy SMAK, Ghent; photograph Dirk Pauwels).

### Exhibition details

#### Sirah Foighel Brutmann and Eitan Efrat:

##### Là

Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst,  
Ghent (SMAK)  
6th April–8th September 2024

## Footnotes

- 1 It is timely that *Là* coincides in part with Akerman's first retrospective in Belgium, *Chantal Akerman: Travelling* at Bozar, Brussels (14th March–21st July 2024), which is a short train ride from Ghent. The retrospective included an installation of *NOW*, which, after Brutmann and Efrat's analysis of Akerman's desert images, cannot be looked at with innocent eyes. Accompanied by a dramatic soundscape of gunshots, distraught animals, wind and retro music, the five suspended screens show images of the Negev desert shot from a moving vehicle using a Blackberry phone; two floor projections show flashing lights. The whole effect is one of chaotic high speed, although there is one tracking sequence that pauses each time it reaches some ancient artisanal stone walls, as though these architectural traces of human inhabitation pose a silent question to the untrammelled movement.

- 2** Akerman's *Histoires d'Amérique* (1989) – in which she documents Yiddish-speaking Jews in America telling stories and jokes, the punchlines of which are dependent on an intimate knowledge of the language – is also pertinent here.
- 3** This phrase originates from a speech delivered by the civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer at the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus in Washington in 1971.
- 4** First coined by Louis Delluc in the early 1920s, it was developed by Jean Epstein. See 'On certain characteristics of photogénie', in R. Abel, ed.: *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907–1939*, Princeton 1988, I, pp.314–18.
- 5** For an in-depth study of the conditions under which Bedouin Palestinians live, see E. Weizman and F. Sheikh: *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, Göttingen 2015. This book was included in the exhibition's reading area.

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