

The New York Times

Cruising New York's Waterways This Week: Portraits of Former Refugees

By Sapan Deb
Sept. 24, 2018

Standing on the waterfront of Brooklyn Bridge Park on a misty Sunday evening, the visual artist Shimon Attie pointed to his latest installation moving slowly up the East River.

It was a tugboat dragging a barge that had been carrying an LED screen through New York City's waterways for four days. The project is called "Night Watch," and the screen on top of the barge— 20 feet across, 12 feet high — looped a silent film lasting nearly 10 minutes. It shows portraits of a dozen individuals who live in or around the city who were granted political asylum. They appear on screen with blank faces staring intently into the camera, occasionally walking toward it.

The beginning of the film features a quote attributed to James Baldwin: "We contain the other, hopelessly and forever." The ending spells out the installation's intent more clearly: "For the millions who have been forced to flee their homelands to escape violence and discrimination. For the fortunate few who have been granted political asylum in the United States."

As the barge went by where Mr. Attie was standing, the Statue of Liberty was prominently visible behind the installation.

"The waterways for New York for the last two centuries have been integral toward welcoming new immigrants from all over the world," Mr. Attie said.

The exhibition was commissioned by More Art, a socially conscious nonprofit based in Manhattan that specializes in public art projects, and was timed to coincide with the United Nations General Assembly convening this week.

Mr. Attie has been doing this kind of work for decades. In a 1991 installation called "The Writing on the Wall," he collected pre-World War II photographs of everyday Jewish life in Berlin and projected them on the streets where they had been taken. In 1998, for "Between Dreams and History," to convey the New York City immigrant experience, he projected written thoughts, including poems, memories and wishes, from 75 residents onto tenement buildings on the Lower East Side.

But this one may be more difficult for viewers to comprehend, given that the only hints of the project's purpose come at the beginning and end, which, because of the barge's movement, many viewers will miss. But even watching the footage without knowing the context, Mr. Attie said, was still valuable.

"There's a powerful resonance about simply having the poetry of these large faces floating by on what looks almost like a 19th-century raft in a completely unexpected location," Mr. Attie said.



The individuals appear onscreen with blank faces staring intently into the camera, occasionally walking toward it.
George Etheredge for The New York Times

In an interview, Mr. Attie, 61, discussed his most recent project, which will run through Sept. 27. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Why did you decide to spotlight former asylum seekers?

There are two answers to that. One is I have a long history of working with refugee and asylum communities. Also, it's a topic of great urgency in this moment of our history. These are people whose lives have been saved by the United States. I couldn't think of something more urgent to do

How did you decide on the 12 people to feature in the film?

That process took a few months. We partnered with several legal advocacy organizations that were getting applications approved for asylum seekers. They came to trust us. They came to trust me. They opened their clients to us. I showed them my past work. I talked to them about what the idea was. I asked them what they thought. If they didn't like the idea, this project would not happen. They loved the idea because it's different. More specifically, I picked people who have character, strong faces, and people who would be good in front of a camera.

Where does this project rank in terms of logistical difficulty?

I've had more difficult and challenging projects and less difficult and challenging projects. The Berlin project was just guerrilla art. That was easy. That was me and four slide projectors.

This project, we started about two years ago. I took about six months considering what I wanted to do.

I'm going to answer a question you didn't ask. The barge and the tugboat resonate in a very historical way, almost like a raft. Yet, right in the middle of it, there's a large contemporary, high-tech, high-resolution LED screen. So they make a very nice synthesis together.

Was connecting with the 12 participants the most challenging part of the process?

Over the years, I've done a lot of community-based projects, especially with communities that have been marginalized. It's a territory I'm familiar with. It is challenging, but it isn't the most challenging part. The most challenging part, I think, is to try and make a strong work of art.

Because I don't work in an instrumental way, I don't have a message. I'm not trying to communicate something that's reduced or specific or foreclosed. Rather, I'm trying to do two things: One is to try to use the language of contemporary art; two, to transmit a possibility to experience this subject matter in a new way.

What do you want people who see this to think about?

As an artist, I'm a little hesitant to get that specific because it's a little more multifaceted than that. I would say that I would like members of the public to take away a possibility to reflect on this topic: "The Stranger Among Us."

There have been different art projects with asylum seekers and refugees even recently. But they typically deal with people from far away trying to flee to safety, whether in Europe or here. These are people who live among us. These are our neighbors. They are our co-workers. They are our friends. This notion of insider and outsider and trying to scramble that and turn that upside down.

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 25, 2018, on Page C2 of the New York edition with the headline: Out on the Water: Images of Asylum.

Giant Video Portraits of Refugees Are Circling Manhattan for the UN General Assembly This Week—See Them Here

Shimon Attie's floating film installation can be seen on New York's Hudson and East Rivers.

Caroline Goldstein, September 25, 2018



Installation view of Shimon Attie's *Night Watch* (2018). Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of the artist and More Art.

As world leaders arrive to the United Nations General Assembly in New York this week, new media artist Shimon Attie is giving them a front row seat to a global issue that he finds particularly pressing.

Attie's floating film installation, *Night Watch*, stars 12 former refugees from around the world who were granted political asylum and relocated to New York. Their digital portraits are displayed onto a 20-foot-tall, 12-foot-wide screen, mounted aboard a barge sailing slowly down the East River and the Hudson River. In the 10-minute silent loop, locals and visitors alike have a chance to see some of the individuals who are affected by the country's changing immigration laws.



Shimon Attie at the opening for *Night Watch*. Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of More Art.

The film was commissioned by the nonprofit group More Art, which helped Attie research and collaborate with legal aid organizations, including the Safe Passage Project and Immigration Equality, as well as community activist groups such as the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project and RIF Asylum Support.

Night Watch will be traveling along the Hudson River from 6 p.m.–8 p.m. on September 25-26. It will appear on the East River, near Brooklyn Bridge Park, from 6 p.m.–8 p.m. on September 27.

See more pictures from the project below:



Installation view of Shimon Attie's *Night Watch* (2018). Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of the artist and More Art.



Installation view of Shimon Attie's *Night Watch* (2018). Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of the artist and More Art.



Installation view of Shimon Attie's *Night Watch* (2018). Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of the artist and More Art.



From left: Victor from Colombia, Denise from Trinidad, Edafe from Nigeria, and Alena from Tatarstan. Courtesy of More Art.



Installation view of Shimon Attie's *Night Watch* (2018). Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of the artist and More Art.



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Installation view of Shimon Attie's *Night Watch* (2018). Photo: Kate Levy, courtesy of the artist and More Art.



Who are the people seeking political asylum in the US?

GABRIELLA ANGELETI

19th September 2018 16:58 GMT



Edafe Okporo, a refugee and gay rights activist from Nigeria who was a victim of mob violence, participated in the project. Okporo is now a published writer, a Beyond the Bar fellow at Columbia University as well as a youth representative to the United Nations Department of Public Information and NGO Executive Committee
Shimon Attie/More Art

On Thursday (20 September), as world leaders convene in New York for the annual United Nations General Assembly, the faces of 12 people who have sought political asylum in the US will appear larger than life on a 12-foot-tall video screen floating along the waterways of the city. The multimedia installation, called *Night Watch* and mounted on a slow-moving barge, was conceived by the New York-based artist and photographer Shimon Attie in collaboration with the non-profit organisation [More Art](#) to “give voice to communities who have been traumatised or victimised because of our current zeitgeist”, Attie says.

The project profiles several LGBTQIA individuals who “faced tremendous vulnerabilities in their native countries and fled under the threat of life or death”, Attie says, adding that the faces of the participants, who came from Kazakhstan, Russia, Colombia and other countries, “emerge from the darkness like in a Caravaggio painting”. The artist, who has previously worked on several site-specific pieces that address immigration and refugees, says he turned to local advocacy groups like *Immigration for Equality* and the *Safe Passage Project* to find the subjects. He recorded their stories because they were “devastating to hear [but] also hopeful,” Attie says, “and they show how resilient humans can be to survive certain situations and strive to make a good life”.

One of the asylum seekers in Night Watch, Edefe Okporo, is a 26-year-old activist who fled Nigeria in 2016 in the wake of the government's draconian anti-homosexuality laws. "There was mob violence and anyone who they thought was queer was attacked", Attie says, adding that Okporo was very badly hurt. His arrival in the US was not without its own troubles, however. "When he landed at the airport and told the immigration folks that he was requesting asylum, he was arrested by ICE and taken to detention in New Jersey for nearly seven months until someone was able to approve his application". Okporo published a memoir about his experience titled *Bed 26*, after the cot he was assigned in prison. He is now a fellow at Columbia University and a youth representative to the United Nations Department of Public Information and NGO Executive Committee.



A rendering of the Night Watch project, running for 20-27 September in New York

The project is being supported by the New York department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts, as well as the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, the Lambent Foundation and private donors. Visitors can track the installation, which travels from Staten Island to the shores of Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, Roosevelt Island, the South Bronx and New Jersey through 27 September, through More Art's social media (Twitter: [@moreart](#), Instagram: [@moreartnyc](#)). A series of [programmes](#) looking at immigration rights has been organised for the run of the project at various parks in New York City and at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea.

"Arts and ethics are intertwined but, unlike politics, art is not about a specific message but stirring some poetic oxygen", Attie says. The dedication that appears at the end of the video portraits strikes such a lyrical tone: "For the millions who have been forced to flee their homelands to escape violence and discrimination. For the fortunate few who have been granted political asylum in the United States."

HYPERALLERGIC

NEWS

Refugee Stories Told from a Barge, Timed for UN General Assembly Session

We talked to Shimon Attie and the subjects of his project about the state of political asylum in America.

Zachary Small 2 days ago



Rendering of "Night Watch" installation by Shimon Attie on waterborne crew boat (courtesy More Art)

[Shimon Attie](#) does not want you to mistake him for a politician. He is simply interested in creating new avenues for political discourse. Perhaps, this is why the artist has taken to Manhattan's waterways with his latest work, "Night Watch," which is a floating barge featuring a large-scale LED video of recent New Yorkers granted political asylum after fleeing violence and discrimination in their homelands.

"I intend to use the language of contemporary art to create new representations for how we see the other or the outsider," Attie said in a statement.

Speaking further with Hyperallergic about his project, Attie noted that Americans, especially New Yorkers, should become more cognizant of the refugees who live with us as neighbors and co-workers. Through understanding their stories, we might better understand the toll that rightwing, xenophobic rhetoric is having on their lives.

In conversation, though, Attie does not explicitly connect “Night Watch” to President Donald Trump’s actions, although the commander-in-chief’s shadow certainly looms large over a project confronting the country’s controversial immigration policing tactics. He did, however, pose one open question: “What does one do with a mad dog of history?”

The artist’s answer seems evident in his work, which will go on view from September 20–27, coinciding with the annual session of the United Nations General Assembly. With the institution’s headquarters on the East River’s shore, it’s probable that many diplomats and world leaders will see Attie’s piece. It’s possible that the president himself may see it.



Behind the scenes shooting “Night Watch” by Shimon Attie, produced by More Art at Chem Creative Studios, Brooklyn (courtesy More Art)

Commissioned by More Art, a nonprofit with a mission to connect artists and communities, that advocates for immigration rights, Attie has also partnered with organizations including Immigration Equality and Safe Passage Project. Through these networks, he met the twelve subjects of his video, many of whom are queer refugees and minors.

Answering questions issued by Hyperallergic, the asylees represented in Attie’s work describe America as their beloved new home, despite today’s ugly immigrant rhetoric. As for the Trump administration, “they should know that now more than ever people are connected and we are nobody’s fool,” one respondent said. “Protest and rebellion show that we know when things are not okay and that they need to change.”



Sergey from “Night Watch” (courtesy More Art)

Another respondent named Sergey, expressed hope that “Night Watch” would remind New Yorkers and President Trump that immigrants made this country. They note that while living in Kazakhstan, they were a journalist and LGBTQ activist attempting to combat a high level of homophobia until it became too dangerous to live there. In America, Sergey is actively following their dream of becoming a medical profession.

When asked what the word “community” means to them, an asylee named Denise noted that the term conjured up images of togetherness. “All of us are united for the purpose of a common good, which allows us to experience what it truly means to be human,” they said. “What it means to be American.”

Traveling at a glacial five miles-per-hour, the barge will be easy to follow for passersby looking to watch Attie’s entire 9 1/2 minute piece. The [project’s website](#) has full details of its travel schedule. Additionally, “Night Watch” will remain stationary for a variety of refugee-related shorefront events during its weeklong cruise:

Thursday, September 20, 2018 6:30-8:30 PM

Wagner Park, Battery Park City ([Directions](#))

“Night Watch” Opening

Saturday, September 22, 2018 5:00-8:00 PM

Viewing Room at Jack Shainman Gallery ([Directions](#)) and Pier 63

A day of dialogue on LGBTQ experiences in the US immigration system

Sunday, September 23, 2018 5:30-7:30

South Bronx, at the end of Lincoln Avenue ([Directions](#))

Article 14. Join More Art, the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, South Bronx Unite and New York Restoration Project for a celebration of NYC immigrants at the Lincoln Avenue waterfront.

Thursday, September 27, 2018 7:30-8:00

Brooklyn Bridge Park, Pier 6

Closing celebration of “Night Watch”



SHIMON ATTIE *sign language*

ANDREA BLANCH: *Why did you choose the places that you did in Israel and Palestine for your series Facts on the Ground?*

SHIMON ATTIE: Well, it's very, very easy to find sites in Israel and Palestine where, content-wise, context-wise, and history-wise, it would have made sense to have certain phrases inserted into the landscape. It's not at all difficult to find contested, fraught, and problematic sites in Israel and Palestine. What's more difficult is to find sites that have all of those elements going on—contested narratives, history—but that are also photographically compelling. I chose those sites because they combined all of the content I wanted, plus I thought I could make dynamic, beautiful, and hopefully arresting photographs of them. In other words, combining aesthetic and content together at the fifty-yard line. I would probably look at fifteen sites for every one that I selected. All fifteen had the history, had the content, would have made sense, but would have led to very boring photographs. And above all else, one must not make bad art.

ANDREA: *How did you come up with the phrases?*

SHIMON: A lot of reflection—that's how I developed the phrases. How do you condense, distill, and articulate the zeitgeist? Whether the zeitgeist ensconced in the body politic, in the landscape—sort of the ideological, psychological, political and cultural subtext that are maybe latent in the landscape of today but not manifest, not immediately visible. I have a very long history with that part of the world. From childhood, I lived there at different phases as well as during formative years. Also, I read a lot of literature growing up relating to the history of Zionism and nationalism—things of that sort. To answer your question, I developed those phrases over the course of a year before I went there to do the project, and I worked very closely with two Israeli colleagues. I created the phrases myself, but I would get

their feedback on them. I would say about three quarters of the phrases are my artistic and literary distillations, and one quarter I kind of plucked from the history of Zionism, but shortened and condensed them.

ANDREA: *How long did this project take you?*

SHIMON: I was working on the phrases for about the course of a year. I hired a producer in Israel to begin the process of getting me permits. The actual production—actually being in Israel creating the piece—was four months. I was invited by an Israeli contemporary art foundation to go there—I probably would have gone anyway, but that made it a lot easier and gave me a platform there. The first two months were devoted to selecting the sites, because the phrases were already developed, and having the light boxes fabricated. So, finding the sites that would work both conceptually and visually aesthetically to hopefully create strong photographs. The light boxes with all those different phrases had to be fabricated there. The second two months were spent in production—six days a week in production. Like, today we are going to go to the Negev Desert, tomorrow we are going to the old city of Jerusalem. The day after we are going to an installation in downtown Tel Aviv. I mean, everything was planned like clockwork, because in Israel you can't just pull up in a car and pull out a generator and light boxes without the military immediately coming up to you. Everything had to be permitted in advance, and that also sometimes only gets you so far.

ANDREA: *While you were working on this project, did your feelings or impressions of Israel change from before you started working on the project?*

SHIMON: I was reminded that if you're American, Jewish, white, male, and speak some Hebrew, you have a tremendous amount of privilege. When I think about all the things that could have gone wrong—and maybe only

Portrait by Andrea Blanch.

I wanted a medium that was more material, hence the sculptural light box pieces that actually have a physical presence.

one or two things went wrong and a hundred things went right—I was just reminded of that position of privilege that I was afforded. For example, I remember doing some of these installations in settlements in the West Bank. Now, even though we had permission from the Secretariat—the administration of the settlement—it didn't mean that Israeli settlers on the ground were going to be cooperative with you. The letter doesn't mean anything to them. I remember doing installations in these settlements and someone would come outside, would walk out of their settler trailer or their caravan, and they would sort of accost me, like, "What are you doing?" And I would say, you know, I would start in Hebrew, "Well I was invited by an Israeli art foundation to come here." And I would say, "I'm from New York," and then the smiles started. And then the settler would say, "My mom was from Brooklyn." So then it's sort of a *mishpacha* [Hebrew word for family]; it's like an 'all in the family' kind of thing even though it's not really.

ANDREA: *Where did your fascination with light boxes begin?*

SHIMON: One of the first times I worked with light boxes was in the nineties, in this underwater light box installation that I created in one of the main canals in Copenhagen. So it was sort of this aesthetic blending between illuminated image and undulating water. You know, my work is probably still quite associated with doing projections—like in my Berlin piece or my Lower East Side piece, here. And one of the reasons I was using projections in those projects is because I was working with something as ethereal as human memory. But for this project in Israel and Palestine, it wasn't so much that I was trying to give voice to memory, per se. It was more about ideology, national narrative, national aspirations. Things that actually get codified, canonized, solidified. I wanted a medium that was more material, hence the sculptural light box pieces that actually have a physical presence.

ANDREA: *When you did this project, what did you want your viewer to walk away with?*



Shimon Attie; *A Different Possession*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.

Hopefully there is enough space in each of the pieces for each viewer to arrive at their own conclusions or questions.



SHIMON: Well, that's the thing with art and art of a particular flavor. I don't want it to be a specific message—that is sort of devoid of poetic spirit or interpretative oxygen. So I think of the pieces as more like opportunities for reflection and using the language of visual art as a way to perhaps create new experiences and associations that might get under the radar of some of our previously held assumptions. Hopefully there is enough space in each of the pieces for each viewer to arrive at their own conclusions or questions. This is a particular challenge that arises when one deals with subject matter that is so overly mediated and overly literal in terms of political discourse.

ANDREA: *Did any of the phrases come from any Palestinian history?*

SHIMON: No, no, absolutely not. That was a place that I was unwilling to go, consciously, because I cannot be Palestinian. I would never dare to think that I could speak for Palestinians. So, I made a conscious decision to not even approach that territory.

ANDREA: *It must be difficult to not personalize a project like this and to be so objective about a project so particularly close to you.*

SHIMON: I actually do face that in a lot of projects I do, because—for better or for worse—I often do projects in very fraught, delicate, traumatized landscapes and communities, or communities' histories. And I think what inoculates me a little bit is that I reflect a lot. I don't do anything quickly. I try to be reflective rather than impulsive.

ANDREA: *That's curious, because a lot of artists—if they are going to deal with a topic such as yours—they want to put in their own opinion. They don't want to keep it ambiguous.*

SHIMON: Well, my opinion is sort of in there. But the



I am trying to create something that is more direct and, therefore, less like documentation.

viewer doesn't need to hear me say, "Oh, you know, I really think that such and such is not good." That's not necessary in that situation. The art will speak for itself. Balance.

ANDREA: *Why did you choose to have empty landscapes devoid of people in Facts on the Ground?*

SHIMON: There are several reasons, but one is, once there's people in them, the people would presumably be looking at the installation. Then the photographs become documentation of an installation. I'm sort of trying to triangulate the viewer of the photograph, the installation itself and then the site and landscape itself. It's like a three-way relationship. So, I am trying to create something that is more direct and, therefore, less like documentation.

ANDREA: *While you were doing Facts on the Ground, what were the reactions on site?*

SHIMON: It was varied. In Tel Aviv, there was everything from the very positive responses to negative. There was a very complicated response from one person whose English was very, very bad, and he misunderstood the phrase, "Do unto others before," even though I was with two Israelis who were helping me that night and they tried to explain to him that he was misunderstanding what the phrase meant, and we couldn't get it through his head. So he parked his motorcycle right in front of the installation so I couldn't photograph it. He thought the phrase meant, "Palestinians were here before," which may or may not be true, but that's not what I was on about. In the Palestinian Authority-controlled areas that I worked, the responses were positive. People kind of instinctively understood that if I'm doing things at the separation wall, they understood that I was probably not applauding the wall being there.

But then I had some unfortunate things as well. I'll tell you something kind of dramatic that was in Abu Dis, which is a Palestinian university town. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We pulled up, took our



Shimon Attie; Above: *A Problem in Logic*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.

I just gave the biggest deer-in-the-headlights look that I could possibly generate.



Shimon Attie; *Wild and Urgent (i)*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.

equipment out of the car at the exact same time as two Israeli armored personnel carriers stopped. I guess they had passed the University entry and maybe someone had thrown a stone at them or not—I didn't see that part. But they stopped and they tear-gassed us, among other people. Have you ever been tear-gassed?

ANDREA: *No, pepper sprayed [both laugh].*

SHIMON: Actually, being tear-gassed is much worse than I ever thought. You know, you think tear gas—it's going to, what, sting your eyes and you're going to cry? That's not what tear gas does. It gets inside and you're on fire and you almost pass out. It's really intense. Anyway, I was tear-gassed and then an Israeli sniper with a high-powered automatic weapon of some kind was pointing his weapon at my forehead for a disconcertingly long amount of time. And the problem was I would have had to raise my voice to speak to him and raising your voice in such a situation is not a good idea. So, I just gave the biggest deer-in-the-headlights look that I could possibly generate.

ANDREA: *So, currently, you're working on a video about Syrian refugees? Can you say something more about the work?*

SHIMON: It's an art video.

ANDREA: *Which means there's no narrative, or what?*

SHIMON: Well, meaning it's not a documentary. I use the whole notion of roulette—the game of roulette, the roulette table—as a way of speaking about the refugee experience, especially for Syrians, North Africans, anyone crossing the Mediterranean. Some make it alive, some drown. Some have the good fortune that their family has a few thousand dollars to get them smuggled, assuming it has a good ending. Others are never even able to leave Syria or they disappear; they just get kidnapped and disappear. So, roulette functioning as a kind of mirror and distillation for the things in our lives

Shimon Attie; Following spread: *A Particular Subject*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.



A

PARTICULAR

SUBJECT

*People are just disappearing
from the table. We don't know why.
Did they win? Did they lose? And
the tension is building in the piece.*

that we have control over and the things that we don't and something as simple as good or bad fortune.

The first thing I did with the Syrian refugees was a commission to create a new piece in Europe. I told them my idea and asked them what they thought. Like, "I want to make an art film with several of you around a roulette table," and I explained to them my motivation, like I just did to you. And I asked them, "Does this speak to you or not?" Because if they thought it was not reflective of their experience, I wouldn't have done the project. But much to my surprise, they were extremely enthusiastic. They were like, "That is exactly what our life experience has been so far." I use moving image footage—you know we shoot in video—but I often have people holding static poses and maybe they're standing on a platform that's rotating or moving. In this particular piece, we start with seven refugees around a roulette table—they don't speak, they are holding static poses—but the camera is moving. The camera is on a dolly, so the camera is moving in different ways and the roulette wheel, with the ball, is sometimes moving. And we use 'old master painting' lighting. It's extremely beautiful. There is a lot of eye candy in the piece. And it's very short, only about eight minutes. We had seven people, now we have six. We don't see the people leave the table. But we go from seven to six to five to four to three to two to one. People are just disappearing from the table. We don't know why. Did they win? Did they lose? And the tension is building in the piece. And so it's a combination of very beautiful and a bit uncanny. Then there is a dedication at the end. Like, "For the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war in Syria and elsewhere, who risked their lives"—I forget the exact words, it's actually in French—but, "who risked their lives, who gambled for their lives and risked everything for a new life in Europe. Seven such individuals appear in this piece." But that piece is almost done. I am at the very beginning of a new piece that I am just working on now for the St. Louis Art Museum, which is in the early phases.



Shimon Attie; *Finders, Keepers*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.

The problem with permanent pieces is everyone has a stake suddenly. So temporary interventions are much easier in that sense...



ANDREA: *Give us a hint.*

SHIMON: Alright, I'll give you a hint. The St. Louis Art Museum is obviously near the Mississippi River, and it is five minutes from Ferguson, Missouri. So that's already telling you what direction I'm thinking in. I am creating an installation inside the museum which has a sculptural aspect to it that is a bit reminiscent of a Huckleberry Finn raft, and it's also a nineteenth century allegory to American race-relations. That raft has a few elements on it that conflate it with more contemporary issues related to police, community, race, even Ferguson. So there will be this beautiful sculptural piece in the center of the gallery with an immersive video environment around it related to the Mississippi River, that's all I can tell you.

ANDREA: *That's exciting. When's that opening?*

SHIMON: The piece opens April, 2017. So that's where I am going to be putting most of my focus for the coming year.

ANDREA: *Your work deals with public installation, if only for a brief amount of time, in order to be photographed. What are your feelings about public installation, and what challenges does it face?*

SHIMON: Well, the big dividing line is: is it permanent or is it temporary? If it's permanent, oh my gosh, the challenges are endless. The problem with permanent pieces is everyone has a stake suddenly. So temporary interventions are much easier in that sense, the burden of due diligence or whatever, it's easier, it's freer. You as the artist are freer because it's temporary; the sense is that the stakes are not as high, I suppose. Regarding why I have a need to create public installations, I think it's because I am an installation artist, and I do have a visceral need in my own body to actually touch and intervene in actual, physical sites. Because you can fake things on a computer with Photoshop if you want to, but for me there is something about intervening in the site that's very central to my artistic impulse.

Shimon Attie; *Unlike Euphoria*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.

Shimon Attie; *Following spread: Land Lord*; Israel/Palestine; 2013-14.



LAND

LORD

‘Open-ended meditation on history’

Artist Shimon Attie to ‘project’ his work at Beth Sholom in Teaneck

By [ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN](#)

May 4, 2017, 11:57 am



Almstadtstrasse 43 (formerly Grenadierstrasse 7): Slide projection of former Hebrew bookstore, 1930, Berlin, shown in 1992, 33" x 40" chromogenic photograph and on-location installation by Shimon Attie (Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

On several consecutive nights in 1992, American artist Shimon Attie projected portions of pre-World War II photographs of Jewish street life in Berlin onto the places where they had been taken, 60 years earlier.

His goal was to recreate, however momentarily, fragments of the city’s long-destroyed Jewish communal life.

Among the projections in “The Writing on the Wall” was the 1930 image of a Hebrew bookstore on the street level of a residential building in Scheunenviertel, which had been one of Berlin’s Jewish quarters at the time.

“One night that I did this, a person living in the building came out in a menacing way and, in German, implied that I was trying to repossess his house,” Mr. Attie said. “He tried to convince me that his father had bought the building from a Mr. Jacob in 1938. Here I am, working as an artist in the imaginary, and he was taking it on a literal level.”

On another night, an elderly woman opened her second-floor window and shouted “No, no, no!” in German at Mr. Attie, who was standing across the street with his generator and slide projector.

The artist at first assumed that she was objecting to what he was doing. But that wasn’t it. “She explained that the bookstore was actually one meter to the right of where I was projecting the image,” he said. “‘I remember,’ she told me.”

Mr. Attie will show images from the project and talk about “The Writing on the Wall” and some of his other evocative works at this year’s annual art lecture at Congregation Beth Sholom in Teaneck on the evening of May 15.

“Sites Unseen: Igniting and Challenging Memory,” the 12th annual free public lecture supported by the Alfred and Rose Buchman Endowment for the Fine Arts, will be Mr. Attie’s first presentation in northern New Jersey. Since earning his master of fine arts degree at San Francisco State University in 1991, Mr. Attie, who lives in Manhattan, has done about 30 major projects in 10 countries. He has exhibited at New York’s Museum of Modern Art and at more than 40 other museums and galleries worldwide.

He has described his approach to works such as “The Writing on the Wall” as “a kind of peeling back of the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried underneath.”



Shimon Attie

The other projects he’ll present on screen at Beth Sholom include his “Portraits of Exile,” underwater light boxes in Copenhagen that show the faces of rescued Jewish citizens and modern Bosnian refugees; “The Neighbor Next Door,” video projections onto Anne Frank’s Amsterdam street of wartime footage taken by Jews in hiding there; “Between Dreams and History,” laser projections on tenement buildings in Manhattan’s Lower East Side that illuminate the immigrant experience; and an art video he made in 2016 showing frozen tableaux of Syrian refugees in Europe on the backdrop of a moving stage.

“The context for the underwater portraits in Copenhagen was the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Denmark, and therefore the exhibition dealt with human-rights challenges and stories: the heroic Danish rescue of their Jewish community on fishing boats to Sweden in 1943, and the more ambiguous Danish response today to present-day refugees,” Mr. Attie explained.

“As the shared thread between these two stories of rescue is water, I therefore created an underwater installation to embody these issues.” The light boxes were submerged in Copenhagen’s Borsgraven canal for six weeks.

The Amsterdam project, in 1995, was inspired by his discovery of wartime footage secretly shot by people in hiding on Prinsengracht Street, often with the aim of documenting the activities of Dutch collaborators. Mr. Attie installed huge film projectors in those hiding places and projected the furtively taken footage on the street below.

He also will talk about “Brick by Brick,” a project he did at the Cologne Fairgrounds during Art Cologne in 1995. “That fair building, during World War II, was among other things a warehouse where household items confiscated from Jewish families and other dissidents were warehoused and auctioned to the public,” he said. For the project, Mr. Attie displayed household items typical of that era outside the building.

Mr. Attie said the decision of which projects to present in Teaneck resulted from discussions with the annual art lecture’s chairs, Reuben and Joan Baron.

“Most of them have to do with Jewish history and identity, or the immigrant and refugee experience,” he said. “Those were the two organizing canvases.

“I have done many, many projects, of which about a third deal with content that is Jewish in nature,” the artist continued. “All of my works, though, regardless of specifics of identity, deal with issues related to displacement, communal loss, and trauma, as well as the potential for regeneration, at least in the realm of imagination. And because I work in the language of an artist, there’s a place for wonderment, beauty, and aesthetics even if the content is communal displacement.”

Ms. Baron said that she and her husband became acquainted with Mr. Attie’s work at a show he did at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and later saw his work in Boca Raton and in the Jack Shainman Gallery in Manhattan.

“He brings together past and present in an interesting way, enabling people to appreciate the past and evaluate the present at the same time, and perhaps to change behavior in the present and create a new future,” she said.

Mr. Baron said they felt Mr. Attie’s body of work “is very important because he’s made people re-examine the notion of memory through a wide variety of visual techniques. However, he’s never concerned just with art for art’s sake; there is always some kind of greater relevance.”

Mr. Attie said he does not have any particular takeaway message in mind for his audiences.

“I’m an artist, not an educator or a politician,” he said. “I am trying to create and communicate experiences, which is different from a message. This is an open-ended meditation on history, an opportunity for each viewer to reflect on the different ways in which past, present, and future operate within the same moment.

What: “Sites Unseen: Igniting and Challenging Memory,” a free public art lecture

Where: Congregation Beth Sholom, 354 Maitland Ave., Teaneck

When: May 15, 7:30 p.m.

For information: Congregation Beth Sholom at (201) 833-2620 or office@cbsteaneck.org.

Shimon Attie’s website: <http://shimonattie.net>

Arts and theater

Artist Shimon Attie gets 'Lost' on the Mississippi River

By Calvin Wilson St. Louis Post-Dispatch Apr 8, 2017



"Lost in Space (After Huck)" by Shimon Attie, on view at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by Tim Parker

In American mythology, the Mississippi River exerts a powerful tug. And that majestic body of water figures prominently in "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," which continues to engage the American imagination.

Both the river that flows alongside St. Louis and the classic Mark Twain novel provided inspiration for "Lost in Space (After Huck)," an exhibition on view through June 25 at the St. Louis Art Museum. The site-specific multimedia installation was created by New York-based visual artist Shimon Attie for the museum's Currents series.

"I have a long history of creating artworks that in some way engage local communities," Attie said during a recent appearance at the museum. As an artist, he's interested in places where "people are fighting over who's in control, who has the power and who's marginalized."

"Those are issues and concerns that inspire me," he said. "But with art, the trick is, how do you take some of those concerns and use them only as points of departure? To then create a work that's more open-ended and has more oxygen in it, so that each person can have their own experience and have their own fantasies? That's my idea of a successful artwork."

The exhibition is curated by Hannah Klemm, assistant curator of modern and contemporary art, with Molly Moog, research assistant. Also on view through June 25 is Attie's video installation, "The Crossing," about a game of roulette with metaphorical implications.

The centerpiece of "Lost in Space" is a cast resin sculpture of a white raft that nods to Huck's picaresque adventures, on which several objects can be seen: a bundle tied to a stick, a cornucopia pipe, a knife, an oar, three sticks bound together — and an incongruous item with a red glow that could be interpreted as either a police light or a safety siren.

The raft is surrounded by a six-channel video installation that depicts a shape-shifting night sky, complete with lightning. Standing in the gallery is like being on a moonscape.

"I usually begin projects by doing research and thinking and reflecting," Attie said. "I spent many, many months considering St. Louis and the fact that it sits on the Mississippi River. I even reread 'Huckleberry Finn,' this literary masterpiece of the 19th century, in which there's a chapter where they go by St. Louis on the raft."



Shimon Attie. Photo by Whitney Curtis

Photo by Whitney Curtis

The tale of rascally Huck and runaway slave Jim, he said, is “an allegory of American race relations” whose themes continue to resonate throughout American culture in the 21st century.

“I try to conflate two different time periods in the same work of art,” Attie said. “By doing so, it confounds our expectations — and forces us to reconsider each in a new light and in a new context. But I’m not here to tell you how the piece should be interpreted.”

Attie was born in 1957 in Los Angeles. His work, which also extends to photography and performance, has been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Attie was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2008 and a Visual Artist Fellowship from Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advance Study in 2006-2007.

“Lost in Space (After Huck)” is undeniably intriguing. But one question that might come to mind when gazing at the raft: If it were placed on the Mississippi River, would it float?

“That sculpture weighs a lot more than one would think,” Attie said. “It’s 500 pounds. It takes eight guys to move it.”

Currents 113: 'Shimon Attie — Lost in Space (After Huck)'

When • Through June 25; museum hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and Saturday-Sunday and 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday

Where • Gallery 210 at the St. Louis Art Museum, 1 Fine Arts Drive, Forest Park; "New Media Series: Shimon Attie" is on view in Gallery 301

How much • Free

More info • slam.org

Calvin Wilson

Calvin Wilson is an arts writer for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

L'Œil

de la PHOTOGRAPHIE

THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY



©Shimon Attie. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

New York : Shimon Attie, Facts on the Ground

MAY 27, 2016 , WRITTEN BY LA-REDACTION-THE-STAFF

For his current exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, **Shimon Attie** presents a moving series of photographs captured across Israel and Palestine. In 2013, Attie traveled throughout these two countries and staged site-specific installations consisting of custom made light boxes with illuminated texts. The series builds on the artist's ongoing investigation into the relationships between place, memory and identity. In this particular work, Attie explored the psychological, cultural and political imperatives underlying the region's conflict. Often drawing attention to the histories of marginalized communities, Attie seeks to give visual form to both personal and collective memories. His practice often involves public installation and accompanying photography, as well as new media and video works that resist interpretation, raising questions and encouraging reflection on issues of history and memory, loss and trauma.

The exhibition is also be accompanied by a monograph from Nazraeli.

EXHIBITION

Facts on the Ground

Shimon Attie

From April 28th to June 4th, 2016

Jack Shainman Gallery

513 West 20th Street

New York, NY 10011

United States

Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-6pm

<http://www.jackshainman.com>

<http://shimonattie.net>

HYPERALLERGIC

The Ineffectiveness of Words and Other Boundaries

by **Seph Rodney** on June 6, 2016



Shimon Attie, "A Problem in Logic" (2014) digital c-print. (all photos ©Shimon Attie, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

The recently closed exhibition by [Shimon Attie](#) at [Jack Shainman gallery](#) is the documentation of a peculiar work made two years ago and installed in contested locations in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The work from 2014 consists of about 30 light boxes of illuminated text inserted in particular sites primarily in and around Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, the Negev desert, and in the occupied West Bank. The boxes were staged in order to be photographed. The photographic documentation is a key component of the work, because in the endless proliferation of these images through digital platforms, these spaces may retain the vestiges of the original installation. With this project, Attie is literally making new memories for his viewers to associate with Israel and Palestine.



Shimon Attie, Facts on the Ground (2016) installation view.

A concern with the relations between place, memory, and identity has long been a part of Attie's practice. He has projected the digitized photographs and speech of previous and longtime residents of neighborhoods that have been historically shaped by their immigrant populations. These site-specific projects consisting of apparitions installed to haunt the citizens of Rome, Berlin, New York, and Copenhagen, are poignant and lovely, giving viewers a sense the past being an irrepressible part of the present. But with this exhibition, *Facts on the Ground*, initially I'm not sure what these words are supposed to do. Are they commentary? Are they correctives? Are they provocations? The gallery's press release characterizes the words as "poetic interventions," but that's no clarification.



Shimon Attie, Facts on the Ground installation view (2016).

There are mostly phrases (in all caps): "All of One's Fears; Land Lord; A Problem in Logic; Something Abnormal; Striking Gold; Finders, Keepers." The "Land Lord" phrase is clearly a play on the twinned seemingly intractable issues that have plagued the region — the religious beliefs that organizes people's lives and the property where these lives are lived. There's something smug about that phrase, slightly self-satisfied, but the "Finders, Keepers," puts this editorializing on different footing. These words illustrate how the conflict between Israel and Palestinians gets reduced to overly simplistic, juvenile terms.



Shimon Attie, "Finders, Keepers" (2014) digital c-print.

With this phrase the absurdist, irrational hole opens up: the words that are mobilized around the conflict, that are used even to describe it to others not directly involved are crucial shadings of

meaning. The Palestinian lands are “annexed,” or are “occupied” or “stolen.” Palestinians are “displaced” or “the resistance” or “stateless.” Even the borders of the state of Israel are contested, particularly since those recognized by the United Nations are not necessarily the same as those the state claims for itself.



Shimon Attie, “Something Abnormal” (2014) digital c-print.

Yet, there is the other side, where words seem useless in the face of deeply embedded beliefs, familial and ethnic solidarity, the mobilization of war machines. Then there is the goading of that word “Facts,” in the show’s title, which, in US public discourse depending on the context, instead of settling arguments, merely fans them into blazing conflagrations despite the stakes being not nearly as high as they are in Israel and Palestine. *Facts on the Ground* is a puzzling and intellectually rankling show because it reminds us, that is, everyone who employs language to makes sense of the world around us, particularly in relation to power, that language has some profound limitations. There may be some conflicts that lie beyond the ministrations of language, some we cannot talk our way out of.

Shimon Attie’s [Facts on the Ground](#) took place at the Jack Shainman Gallery (West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) from April 28 to June 4.

ARTSEEN

JUNE 3RD, 2016

SHIMON ATTIE *Facts on the Ground*

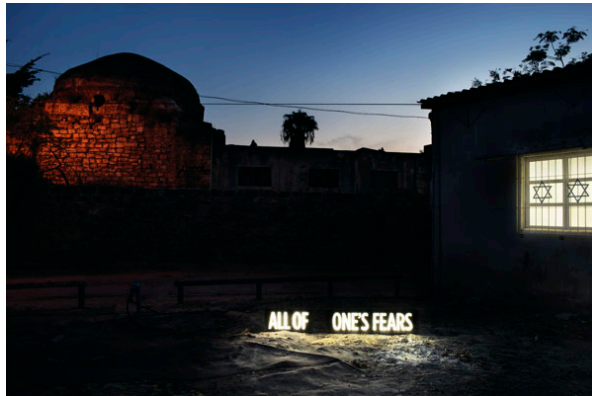
by Yasaman Alipour

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | APRIL 28 – JUNE 4, 2016

A lot could be said of those two words, appearance and reality! [. . .] I thought I could hear echoes of it in the phraseologies and absurdly sweeping slogans attributed to the sort of figures that haunt the imagination of nations in revolt.

Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*

After twenty years of meditating on social psyches, Shimon Attie has brought the Israel/Palestine conflict to Jack Shainman Gallery. Celebrated for his experimental approach, which blurs the line between installation and photography, Attie has spent his career moving from one city to the next to explore the trauma and history of the marginalized and to reflect on social memory and the construction of identity. Seductive, daring, and clever, *Facts on the Ground* dives into the inherently charged and polarized politics of its subject matter.



Shimon Attie, *ALL OF ONE'S FEARS*, Two on-location light boxes, sited between Synagogue and ruins of former Mosque attacked by rioting Israelis during second Intifada, Cvar Shalem neighborhood, Tel Aviv, 2014. Digital c-print. 40 × 60 inches. ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

In twelve large photographs with pastel-like colors, Attie focuses on an enchanted desert, voided of all humans, in order to transcend both sides of the tension and override normalized images of conflict. He interrupts the landscapes by creating his own installations with short poetic statements. Clinical titles briefly contextualize the horrific history of images that are rich in their vagueness. Attie achieves something profound: he presents a unique opportunity to contemplate

Israel/Palestine without the distraction that is simultaneously a manifestation of the limitations of visual or written language and the possibilities of their alliance.

A PROBLEM IN LOGIC, Two on location custom made light boxes, Israel-Palestine Separation Wall, Abu Dis, Palestinian City, West Bank (2014) visualizes the separation that has continuously defined the upheaval. Under a pinkish sky—dusk or perhaps dawn—a barren hill is segregated by a long sweeping concrete wall. On the side and beyond the border, the continuing hill is filled with repeating cube-like buildings. Emerging from the horizon is a curving road that runs across the wall but appears to be stopped by it. Attie’s intervening words challenge the familiar image; next to the gray wall—filled with English statements in support of the resistance—two light-boxes are placed: “A PROBLEM” and “IN LOGIC.” The short sentence creates a moment of silence that invites us to revisit the image, and even its subject.

Attie repeats this approach throughout the project. The simple and poetic illustrations of the ongoing tragedy; the protest embedded in the short, haiku-like statements; and the burden of the provided information come together to create puzzles that refuse to be solved. Most significantly, what allows this multi-layered experience is Attie’s mastery as an image maker—his attention to detail.



Shimon Attie, *LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967, 2014*. Digital c-print. 49 1/8 × 73 1/8 × 2 1/8 inches. ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

ALL OF ONE’S FEARS, Two on-location light boxes, sited between Synagogue and ruins of former Mosque attacked by rioting Israelis during second Intifada, Cvar Shalem neighborhood, Tel Aviv (2014) is an intentionally simplistic analogy of the crisis. The mosque stands on one corner, the humble synagogue—a small house with windows illuminating a Star of David—on the other. Between them, a silhouetted palm tree symbolizes Middle East’s Eden. Across the darkening sky of the two cities, electricity wires run, crossing each other and connecting the two opposing poles. The pebbles on the ground are illuminated with two light boxes: “ALL OF,” “ONE’S FEARS.” Their separation makes the words stand out: “All,” “One,” “Fears,” each so core to the situation.

Effective as it is, Attie’s obscurity only protects him to an extent. In recent years, generalizations and simplifications have become common refuge in discussions of the ongoing disputes. Attie takes a different path. A closer look into the exhibition as a whole unfolds deeper complexities; the recurring themes of identity and conflict can circle back to the artist himself: Attie is a Jewish American who has chosen, for the most part, to stand in Palestine and look into Israel—and specifically at its fraught settlements.

At points, Attie succeeds in creating a single image that contains the different layers simultaneously. In *LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967*, (2014), Attie stands in the Palestinian village of Umm Tuba looking into the Israeli settlement of Har Homa. The foreground focuses on small details: dirt, rubbish, destruction. The image gradually goes out of focus in perspectival depth: roads lead the eyes to a hilltop covered by the identical high-rises of Har Homa. The two loaded words, “Land” and “Lord” are placed on the far sides on the empty ground, balancing the image and creating an invisible entry to the emerging army of buildings. The title continues to describe Umm Tuba, “annexed by Israel in 1967.” The blurred lights of the distant roads and homes turn into lit candles. An unknown tragedy is mourned.

Like two mirrors, Attie faces his abstracted information and his seductive photography towards one another, in endlessly repeating mutual reference. Still the obscurity of his poetics doesn't make him immune to partiality. The intended audience and the delivered message are, however obliquely, discernable in Attie's smart and conscious choices: his wording, his decisions as image-maker, his controversial subjects, and even his use of the English language. Rather than a universal truth, *Facts on the Ground* is a gate, holding within it a road carved by the artist. It is entirely up to the viewer to decide how far they will go.



May 18 2016

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

Current exhibitions:

Radcliffe Bailey, "Quest"

Through June 4

"Quest" marks Radcliffe Bailey's fifth solo exhibition at this gallery. Working primarily in sculpture, painting and found photography, Bailey explores the complexity of contemporary identity in the face of history, ancestry and collective memory. "Quest" plumbs the depths of American history in an attempt for a fuller understanding of this shared past.

→ 513 W 20th St (212-645-1701, jackshainman.com). Tue-Sat 10am-6pm.

Shimon Attie, "Facts on the Ground"

Through June 4

This exhibition marks Shimon Attie's sixth solo at the gallery. "Facts on the Ground" features his recent series (of the same name), which captures the artist's poetic interventions at meaningful public spaces across Israel and Palestine.

→ 524 W 24th St (212-337-3372, jackshainman.com). Tue-Sat 10am-6pm.

Forbes

Lifestyle

Artist Shimon Attie On Photography, Language, Beauty And Getting Tear Gassed

MAY 6, 2016 @ 11:42 AM



Alina Cohen
CONTRIBUTOR

I write about art and culture in New York City and beyond.

TWEET THIS



"I'm attempting to articulate the zeitgeist, the hopes, the disappointments, the problematics of ideology that are somehow present in the land but not visible," said Attie.



Facts on the Ground asks us to reconsider how language, when wielded with immense thought and concern for beauty, can illuminate even the most fraught spaces.



LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967, 2014 ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In [Shimon Attie's](#) series of photographs, *Facts on the Ground*, language becomes a part of the landscape. Attie captured different locations in Israel and Palestine, from Tel Aviv to the Negev Desert to the West Bank. He inserted his own light boxes, which display brief messages, into the scenes. Using a generator, he illuminated the boxes and photographed them in his chosen settings. His captions, which accompany the photographs, add context to each location. Last week, [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in Chelsea opened an exhibition of a selection of the works.

Take, for example, *SOMETHING ABNORMAL*, *Two on-location custom made light boxes, Lifta (former Palestinian village bombed and evacuated during the 1948 War)*. Attie's image of crumbling, ancient stone buildings exudes a sense of desolation. In contrast, modern high-

rises sit above the ruins. Two light boxes slant downhill in front of the nearest structure, reading “SOMETHING ABNORMAL.” The sky is a gloomy gray, but a bit of light peaks from the clouds. Attie’s brief history of the site within his caption enriches our understanding of this place. The words indicate the violence and conflict that have led to the barrenness of the scenery.



SOMETHING ABNORMAL, Two on-location light boxes, Lifta (former Palestinian village bombed and evacuated during 1948 war), 2014 ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The viewer is left to discern the meaning of “Something Abnormal.” Perhaps it questions the striking contrast between the old and new, or maybe it refers more generally to the history of Israeli and Palestinian lands. Perhaps what’s abnormal is the emptiness in a place where people once lived. Each of Attie’s photographs contains one of these brief, ambiguous phrases, asking the viewer to reconsider the landscapes. Other phrases include “A DIFFERENT

POSSESSION” (situated on Mount Scopus, overlooking an annexed Palestinian Village), “WITHOUT IS WITHIN” (looking into a mosque in Tel Aviv), and “UNLIKE EUPHORIA” (in Rabin Square, the site of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin’s assassination).

“They’re open to interpretation,” Attie told me by phone the afternoon after his show opened. “There’s a poetic, interpretive oxygen in the phrases.” Attie spent about eight months developing them, primarily from his own artistic and literary distillations. Some came from the history of Zionism. “The Israeli philosopher Gershom Scholem would be one example.” He completed this phase of the project in New York, where he lives.

“I’m attempting to articulate the zeitgeist, the hopes, the disappointments, the problematics of ideology that are somehow present in the land but not visible,” said Attie. 🐦 His photographs transform spoken and unspoken words of conflict and hope into visual language. With “about eighty good phrases,” he arrived in Israel on a grant from an Israeli foundation. For about six weeks, he and his crew drove around the country, scouting the proper sites for his phrases.

“There’s no shortage of locations in that region where these phrases would have worked,” he said. “It’s very easy to find sites in Israel and Palestine that are contested, that are fraught, layered, problematic. What’s more difficult is finding sites that would also make beautiful installations and photographs. If they can’t lead to beautiful photographs, they won’t make good art.”



A PROBLEM IN LOGIC, Two on location custom made light boxes, Israel-Palestine Separation Wall, Abu Dis, Palestinian city, West Bank, 2014 ©Shimon Attie. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

MUSÉE

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

MAY 4

Shimon Attie at Jack Shainman

Jack Shainman Gallery was pleased to announce Shimon Attie's sixth solo exhibition at the gallery. *Facts on the Ground* features Attie's recent series of the same name which captures the artist's poetic interventions at meaningful public spaces across Israel and Palestine.

In 2014, Attie inserted approximately thirty custom light boxes of illuminated text into the contested landscape to produce site-specific installations staged specifically to be photographed. The glowing words both comment on the surrounding region and literally illuminate it, while additionally suggesting the inability of text and image to fully convey meaning.



Image above: ©Shimon Attie, LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967, 2014 digital c-print / Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Rich with ambiguity, the phrases—some culled from the history of Zionism, others artistic distillations—resist interpretation, while pointing to some of the psychological, cultural, and political anxieties at stake in present day Israel and Palestine. Conceptually layered and visually arresting, these immersive images offer opportunities for reflection, while raising as many questions as they answer.



Image above: ©Shimon Attie, STRIKING GOLD, Two on-location light boxes, Israeli Settlement, West Bank, 2014, digital c-print / Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Attie was born in Los Angeles in 1957, received his B.A. from the University of California in 1980 and M.F.A from San Francisco State. Attie currently lives and works in New York. He has received numerous honors, including fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (2008-2009), The Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University (2006), and the Pollack-Krasner Foundation (2006, 1998), and awards such as the Lee Krasner Lifetime Achievement Award in Art (2013), a Cultural Lifetime Achievement Award in Visual Arts from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (2005), and the Prix de Rome (2001-2002).

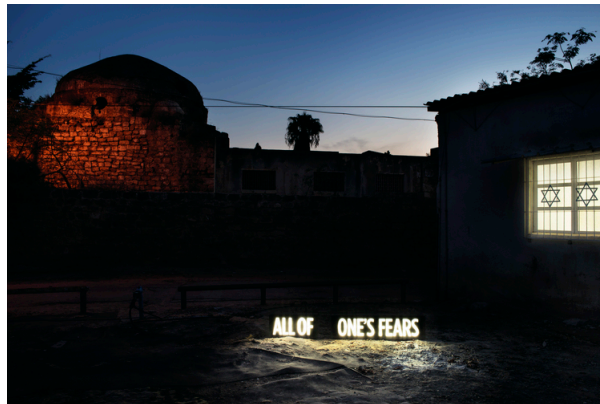


Image above: ©Shimon Attie, ALL OF ONE'S FEARS, Two on-location light boxes, sited between Synagogue and ruins of former Mosque attacked by rioting Israelis during second Intifada, Cvar Shalem neighborhood, Tel Aviv, 2014, digital c-print / Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Public collections holding Attie's work include the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Centre George Pompidou, Paris; International Center for Photography, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Jewish Museum, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., among others. Attie is currently working on *The Leave-Taking*, a film made in collaboration with Syrian refugees who have recently arrived in Europe. In April 2017, he will be featured as part of the Saint Louis Art Museum's series, *Currents*, which will showcase a new project.



Image above: ©Shimon Attie, WILD AND URGENT (i), Two on-location light boxes, Settler Houses, Israeli Settlement, West Bank, 2014, digital c-print / Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

A catalogue accompanying Facts on the Ground will be released to coincide with the exhibition's opening. The monograph features 22 full-page color plates, an introduction by Mieke Bal, an essay by art historian Gannit Ankori and architect/artist Samir Srouji, and a poem by Maureen N. McLane.

On Tuesday, May 10th at 5:30pm, Attie will be in conversation at the New York Public Library with Maya Benton, Curator at the International Center of Photography, and Norman Kleeblatt, Chief Curator, The Jewish Museum. The program will be held at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, Celeste Auditorium, and is free and open to the public.

Concurrently on view is a solo exhibition of the work of Radcliffe Bailey at 513 West 20th Street. Upcoming exhibitions include A Change of Place: Four Solo Exhibitions, featuring work by Pierre Dorion, Hayv Kahraman, Richard Mosse, and Garnett Puetz and opening at The School in Kinderhook on May 22nd.

Shimon Attie: Facts on the Ground is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery until June 4, 2016 at 513 W 20th st, New York, NY

Thumbnail image: ©Shimon Attie, LAND LORD, Two on-location light boxes, looking onto the Israeli settlement Har Homa from the Palestinian Village Umm Tuba, annexed by Israel in 1967, 2014 digital c-print

PAPER

11 MUST-SEE ART SHOWS OPENING THIS WEEK

Gary Pini 04/27/16 at 04:03PM



Jack Shainman (524 West 24th Street) opens "Facts on the Ground," the gallery's sixth solo show by Shimon Attie, on Thursday, April 28, 6 to 8 p.m. The New York-based artist installed and photographed thirty light boxes with text in public spaces in Israel and Palestine. Up until June 4. Attie is also in conversation with Maya Benton and Norman Kleeblatt on May 10, 5:30 p.m., at the New York Public Library.



Shana Nys Dambrot

[Become a fan](#)

October 9, 2015

Art critic, curator, essayist based in Los Angeles.

Art AIDS America: An Impressive Exhibition and an Important Curatorial Event

Posted: 07/13/2015 12:56 pm EDT | Updated: 07/15/2015 10:59 am EDT



Joey Terrill Born Los Angeles, California, 1955

Still-Life with Forget-Me-Nots and One Week's Dose of Truvada, 2012

Mixed media on canvas, 36 × 48 inches

Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation, Foundation purchase

As part of the [One City One Pride LGBTQ Arts Festival](#) and [WeHo@30](#), the City of West Hollywood hosts about a bazillion ongoing and special engagement events in the galleries, libraries, design and culture centers, civic meeting halls, theaters, parks, and the very streets of the City. This has been going on since the end of May and shows little sign of abating any time soon. The only problem is, amid all the well-earned exuberance and celebratory calendar-stuffing though, there's one particular exhibition that you might have missed. Let's fix that right now -- because [Art AIDS America](#) may be the most important, historically salient, stylistically diverse, and politically inspirational of them all. Which is saying something.

[Art AIDS America](#) is the first comprehensive survey considering some 30 years of art produced in response to the AIDS epidemic in the United States. Covering the early years of the crisis through to the present day, Art AIDS America was organized by the Tacoma Art Museum in partnership with the Bronx Museum of the Arts -- its full version opens in Tacoma in late 2015 followed by New York in 2016. But as a kind of high-culture present for its 30th birthday, the City of West Hollywood gets to see it first. Already on view and continuing through September 6, a special sneak peek preview of the show is installed at both the West Hollywood Library and ONE Archives Museum & Gallery, right here at home. With about 50 works on view, those at the Library include artists from across the country; ONE Archive's selections focus on California artists, including previously unseen photographs by Catherine Opie.



Shimon Attie: Untitled Memory (projection of Axel H.), 1998, Ektacolor photograph, Edition 1 of 3, 32 × 38 3/4 inches Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The show was co-curated by art historical heavyweights Rock Hushka, Chief Curator at Tacoma Art Museum, and Dr. Jonathan D. Katz, Director of the Visual Studies Doctoral Program of the University at Buffalo. Though on view through Labor Day, this weekend has one very special engagement planned, as Dr. Katz leads a free guided walk-through on Saturday, July 18 beginning at 1pm at the Library, and moving to the ONE Archive at about 2:30.

As City of West Hollywood Mayor Lindsey Horvath noted in her moving remarks at the exhibition's opening reception, "Artists are so often on the forefront of social change and activism. So while we continue to mourn those we lost too early, we also celebrate the artists who brought AIDS to the attention of the world as artistic protest and call to action. We hope the works you see will lead you to a deeper appreciation of the time in which they were created, the struggles that the community undertook, and the brave and beautiful vision that artists shared of their anger, loss, and perhaps even hope."

More than an invaluable reminder of the power of creative responses to political challenges, this exhibition is an aesthetic tour de force appealing to any appreciator of contemporary American art. It is impressively diverse and eclectic in terms of the mediums, messages, and included artists themselves. Memorable masterpieces, fresh perspectives, tragedy, hope, progress, and milestones both unsettling and inspirational are the order of the day in this exhibition that is ostensibly about how the AIDS crisis changed society -- but is really about how art can change the world.

ART AIDS AMERICA, Venues and Hours through September 6:

West Hollywood Library, 625 N. San Vicente Blvd., West Hollywood, CA 90069; Monday-Thursday: 11am-7pm; Friday and Saturday: 10am-6pm

ONE National Archives and Gallery, 626 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, CA 90069; Thursday: 4pm-8pm; Friday, Saturday & Sunday: 1pm-5pm

Saturday, July 18: Jonathan D. Katz, PhD Leads his tour from 1-2:30pm at the West Hollywood Library and from 2:45-3:30p.m. at the ONE Archives Gallery & Museum.

American Photography's

PROPHOTODAILY

See It Now: How AIDS Changed Art Forever

By David Schonauer Tuesday August 11, 2015



Shimon Attie, Untitled Memory (projection of Axel H.), 1988

Not many exhibitions make you look at history in a new way.

But that is exactly what “[Art AIDS America](#)” does. The exhibition, previewing this summer at the ONE Archives Gallery & Museum in West Hollywood before opening in a fuller version at the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington on October 3, is the first comprehensive survey considering some 30 years of art produced in response to the AIDS epidemic in the United States. The work — including photography from Robert Mapplethorpe, Bill Jacobson, Andres Serrano, David Wojnarowicz and Kia Labeija — covers the periods both before and after the introduction of medicine that extended the lives of those living with HIV. And in doing so, it points to a profound change that took place.

In the words of co-creator Rock Hushka, the exhibition shows “how the artists’ response to the epidemic utterly changed artistic practice in the United States.”

The exhibition has been met with wide praise in the media. At the [Huffington Post](#), for instance, LA art critic Shana Nys Dambrot calls it “historically salient, stylistically diverse, and politically inspirational.”

Before the AIDS crisis, notes [Wired](#), “popular art wasn’t all that biographical — consider Andy Warhol’s screen printed homages to consumerism, or Jackson Pollock’s abstracted paintings. AIDS changed that. It spurred artists to use the medium to tell the world about their crisis.”

“Here was art living out its ideal and making change and doing it in an unapologetic way,” says Hushka, the Tacoma Art Museum’s chief curator.

Co-curator Jonathan David Katz tells [POZ](#) that the show’s oldest piece, Izhar Patkin’s “Unveiling of Modern Chastity,” from 1981, “is, as far as I know, the first work of art about AIDS.” The artwork, a depiction of wounds and lesions on a putrid green surface, is an obvious reference to Kaposi’s sarcoma, notes the website.

While art from the 1980s and 1990s aimed to insert AIDS into the art world’s conversation—and that of the culture at large—work made after the HIV medicines were introduced kept the virus in the public consciousness, says Hushka, pointing, for instance, to the work of Labeija, a 25-year-old photographer who contracted HIV from her mother at birth.

“Her glamorous self-portraits are a more celebratory, empowered interpretation of what it’s like to have the virus today, even though her condition is an integral part of the work,” notes [Wired](#).

“Memorable masterpieces, fresh perspectives, tragedy, hope, progress, and milestones both unsettling and inspirational are the order of the day in this exhibition that is ostensibly about how the AIDS crisis changed society — but is really about how art can change the world,” writes Dambrot.



Preview: Two video-centric exhibitions at the Wexner cover meaningful ground

By Jackie Mantey
From the May 2, 2013 edition



Shimon Attie's video installation "MetroPAL.IS." at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

"Shimon Attie: Metro.PAL.IS."

Pronounced "metro palace," video and film artist Shimon Attie's video installation's title alludes to its subject: the Palestinian and Israeli conflict.

Mantey, Jackie. "Preview two video-centric exhibitions at the Wexner cover meaningful ground." *Columbusalive.com*, 2 May 2013. <http://www.columbusalive.com/content/stories/2013/05/02/preview-two-video-centric-exhibitions-at-the-wex-cover-meaningful-ground.html>

Attie's family is from the Middle East, and although he has "deep connections" to that part of the world, even having lived there for some time as a teenager, Attie avoided the issue in his art.

"I never did a project on it, although, for 20 years people were telling me, 'Why don't you do a project in Israel,'" Attie said. "I finally did feel like it was the right time. I did so with great caution because who knows how much mediocre political art is done about the Middle East conflict. It is fraught with a lot of traps. That made me hesitant."

In "Metro.PAL.IS," eight HD video screens are set up in a half circle. Each screen features a Palestinian and Israeli actor from New York. They are paired off into characters — the Palestinian businessman/ the Israeli businessman, the Palestinian "Jersey girl"/ Israeli "Jersey girl," etc. The characters take turns reading a hybrid text Attie wrote of the Israeli Declaration (1948) and the Palestinian Declaration (1988).

Eventually the characters' distinctions of being Israeli or Palestinian are less clear and the similarities in the peoples' struggles are brought to the surface.

"It's one of those pieces that's incredibly complicated to explain but incredibly powerful to experience," said Jennifer Lange, curator of the center's Film/Video Studio Program, where Attie, as a visiting artist in 2010, worked meticulously on the project's complicated, multi-layered sound composition.

"Sonically, it's really beautiful," she said. "It does become this musical thing; it's almost harmonies that are created."

Shimon Attie Projects Past Into Present *Visual Artist Brings World War II Into Modern Reality*

By Laura Hodes

Published November 14, 2012, issue of November 16, 2012.



COURTESY SHIMON ATTIE AND JACK SHAIMAN GALLERY

Projecting History: Artist Shimon Attie projects images from the past onto present day environments.

Artist Shimon Attie is probably best known for "Sites Unseen," his 1990s series of temporary installations in Europe, in which he projected photographic images of a lost Jewish past onto actual sites. For "Writing on the Wall," (1991-1993), Attie, living in Berlin at the time, was haunted by the lack of any past signs of Jews, so he projected images of former Jewish citizens onto the actual buildings, forcing local people to reflect on the disappearance of their former neighbors. In "Trains" (1993) he projected photographs of Dresden's former Jewish citizens onto the city's central railway station. In these installations, he was responding to a personal feeling that these places were haunted by dead Jews of whom there was an absence of any external sign.

Attie uses art to externalize his private visions – his postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch, a Columbia University professor of English and comparative literature who has written extensively on this topic, would call it – and make them part of the collective memory of the viewer. The experience of postmemory is to be haunted by the traumatic memories of past generations to such an extent that those memories seem one's own. Attie's in situ installations create a powerful visual palimpsest, a visible layering of the past onto the present, projecting images onto sites where the inhabitants would rather just forget history.

Currently, Attie's 1995 installation, "The Neighbor Next Door," has been re-envisioned by Attie and by co-curators Dave Tolchinsky and Debra Tolchinsky, at Northwestern University's Mary & Leigh Block Museum of Art, where it will be exhibited until December 9. In the original 1995 in situ installation, Attie mounted 16-mm film projectors inside the windows of three different apartments along the same street in Amsterdam on which Anne Frank and other Jews had hidden during World War II; then, at night, he projected short film loops including actual footage that Jews in hiding during the Holocaust filmed from nearby windows. (One of the three films is actually from Nazi propaganda, an image of soldiers marching in formation.) These images differed from those of his other installations in projecting images of Nazis rather than Jews. Dutch passersby walked through the projected images; some stopped and turned, others kept walking. As art critic James E. Young wrote, the images forced the Dutch passersby to confront the national myth of how the Dutch sheltered Jews, and to immerse themselves in the hidden Jews' memory and see the outside world from their perspective.

In this exhibit at Northwestern, these same three film loops are shown within the pure "white space" of the Alsdorf Gallery. Unlike the 1995 Dutch passersby who were surprised by and confronted with these images as they walked along the street, we are not physically walking through these projected images. As gallery visitors, we know to expect the images, although it takes effort to find them. Our experience of the original filmed image is mediated, like postmemory itself.

When you enter the gallery, you feel cocooned within its white space and within the loud, ambient noises of street sound, as if in a dream-space. The filmed images are not easily found or consumed on projected screens; instead, you enter the gallery and see only white walls, a crooked winding hallway evoking an attic as if you are the hiding Jew. It is only upon second look that you see three tiny holes notched in the wall, and you must bend and peer into the holes to see the films from the 1995 installation. Our viewing is active; as we look we cannot see the entire filmed image. When you peer into the holes, you feel you are peering into actual memories, the memories of the hidden Jew filming the image and the memories of the Nazis and collaborators, marching in spectral procession. Enhancing the feeling that we are entering the space of memory is the sense of fragmentation and repetition: The films are only several minutes long and repeat in endless flashes; the soundtrack of street noise continually repeats, just as our own memories continually return to us.

These projected images seem more blurred than they do in published reproductions of the 1995 installation. Unlike in the original images, here one cannot make out facial features or any details. The images have lost their sharpness and focus, much like memories do with time. The marching Nazis in "Prinsengracht 572: Passing Funeral" and "Prinsengracht 468: Passing Military Band" pass like shadows along the 1995 cobblestone pavement, spectral images of young men playing instruments in a band, of horses nodding their heads from the dead. The typical layering effect of Attie's work is heightened in this reinstallation. Historical boundaries – between 1940s Amsterdam, 1995 Amsterdam and 2012 Evanston – are blurred. Witness perspectives are superimposed so that hiding Jews, wartime Nazis and collaborators, Dutch onlookers of 1995 and 2012 gallery viewers share the same vantage. While looking at the images we are suspended between layers of time as if in the space of dreams or memory. The effect is to transform this small gallery, so far across the seas of time and space from 1945 Amsterdam, into a sacred space, a collectively experienced memorial to the dead, a place for the reanimation of lost, forgotten and repressed memories.

At the same time, the installation is a reflection on the power of the medium of film itself. While we stand in the gallery, it is as if we are standing within the walls of a camera obscura, the ceiling lights beaming through the small holes and casting blurred images onto the Amsterdam streets. I was reminded later of the line from Jonathan Littell's novel "The Kindly Ones," in which

the narrator, an SS officer, says, "I was always observing myself: It was as if a film camera were fixed just above me, and I was at once this camera, the man it was filming, and the man who was then studying the film."

Attie has transformed two individual visions – his own postmemory and the hidden Jew's film footage – into a collective one. Far from passive viewers of these films, we become simultaneously the hidden Jew, the marching Nazi, the Dutch passersby, the voyeur and even the medium itself.

Laura Hodes is a writer and lawyer living in Chicago.

SHIMON ATTIE

JULY 21 - OCTOBER 8, 2006



Miami Art Museum

new ways of seeing



population, what Attie once termed “the singular presence of the absent.”⁵ He was struck by “the discrepancy between what I felt and what I did not see.”⁶ Immediately upon receiving his degree, Attie returned to Berlin, where he spent six years working and traveling throughout Europe. Speaking of his European sojourn, Attie has said, “I came to these cities and cultures not as a *tabula rasa* or ‘objective observer,’ but as an artist profoundly influenced by stories about the war told to me as a small child by my parents and their friends, some of whom were Holocaust survivors. I learned through these stories, particularly those told by my father, that part of being Jewish meant I was connected to a life and culture that no longer existed.”⁷

In Europe, Attie created a series of public installations that he collectively titled *Sites Unseen*. By projecting images relating to their lost histories onto various sites, Attie sought to investigate the problematic relationship between the remembered and mediated past. As Attie put it, his work sought “to give visual form to the personal and collective histories that are latent—but not visible—within our cities’ architecture.”⁸



The earliest of these public works are a series of interventions in the city of Berlin that Attie titled *The Writing on the Wall* (1991-1993). For this project, Attie combed through Berlin’s archives to find pre-WWII photographs of Berlin’s *Scheunenviertel*, the part of the city where Eastern European Jews had settled. Using slide projectors, he then superimposed these archival images onto buildings in the

contemporary *Scheunenviertel*. When Berlin was divided after the war, the *Scheunenviertel* had been in East Berlin. At the time Attie was working, many of the pre-war buildings still existed, often in various stages of dilapidation.⁹ Using a pre-WWII map (many street names were changed after the war), Attie identified a number of the locations where the archival photos had been taken and was able to project the images onto the same structures that appeared in the photos. In cases where the old buildings had been destroyed or exact addresses were unknown, Attie projected onto nearby buildings.

The projections were short-term urban interventions, appearing only for a night or two. The black-and-white projected images appeared as pale ghosts of the area’s history, which had been obliterated by the Nazi Holocaust. In speaking of the interventions, Attie relates that what passers-by experienced “first and foremost, was an aesthetic response. People would walk by and see something beautiful—maybe hauntingly beautiful, but beautiful... Then the content would sink in, and that would be a different matter.”¹⁰ Attie has described his intentions as “a kind of peeling back of the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried underneath.”¹¹

Although the Berlin interventions were only temporary, Attie “fixed” them in time by photographing them and creating large-scale color prints of the results. “The photographs are not intended to merely record the installations; rather, through conscious composition and framing, their purpose is to point to the larger relationship between the installation and the environment in which it takes place.”¹² Attie’s projections and photographs thus blur the boundaries between performance, installation and photography.

The success of *The Writing on the Wall* led to a series of commissioned temporary public works in Dresden (1993), Cologne (1995), Copenhagen (1995), Amsterdam (1995), and Krakow (1996). Though the history of the Holocaust was central to all of these works (several were commissioned in conjunction with events commemorating the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II), Attie became increasingly concerned with making links between the past and the present. In Copenhagen, for example, he created *Portraits of Exile*, a series of nine illuminated light boxes placed just beneath the surface of the central Børsgraven canal. Some of the light boxes contained images of Jews that Danes had helped escape to Sweden during the war (almost the entire Danish Jewish community escaped the Nazi occupation). But Attie also included portraits of contemporary refugees from Bosnia, the Soviet Union, and other troubled areas who were living in makeshift facilities in Copenhagen while the Danish government debated their fate. In Krakow, where *Schindler’s List* had

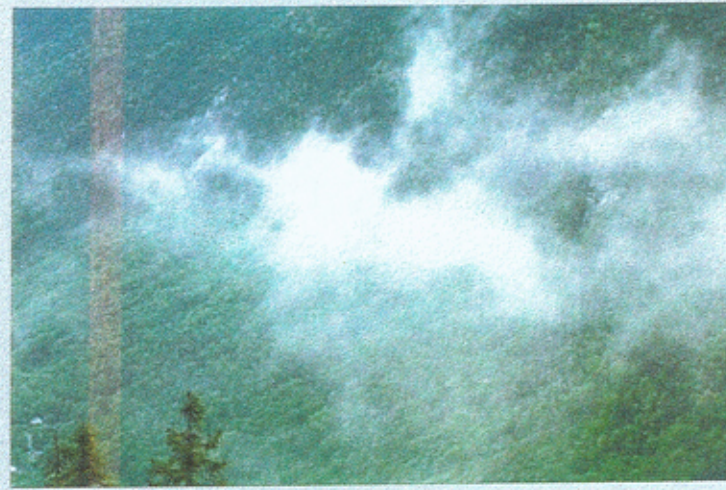
Shimon Attie's *New Work* installation at MAM provides a beguiling Nordic respite from Miami's tropical summer heat, lifting us into a new world of mountain landscapes, melting snows, and cascading waterfalls.

It consists of two complementary parts: *Light Under Night*, a three-screen video projection with full-surround sound environment and a set of five light boxes titled *The Heroes of Telemark*. *Light Under Night* leads viewers into the strange, in-between world of nature and technology of a subterranean hydroelectric plant in the village of Rjukan in the Telemark region of Norway. The town of Rjukan exists only because of a revolutionary effort to convert the power of waterfalls into electricity initiated in 1905, the year that marked the founding of the interlinked entities of the Norsk Hydro power company and the modern Norwegian state. *The Heroes of Telemark* features portraits of some of the few laborers still employed in Rjukan by Norsk Hydro after years of local downsizing. The series is named after a 1965 film starring Kirk Douglas inspired by a raid by Norwegian resistance fighters who sabotaged a Nazi lab in Rjukan during World War II, an event of great national pride.

Light Under Night provides a lyrical, understated meditation on the intersection of nature, industry and daily life. Its 17-minute duration offers a rhythmic intercutting of Nordic landscapes, flowing water, an underground power plant, and the comfort of a luxurious home. It opens and closes with a pair of haunting Telemark folk songs that tell of a magical creature that inhabits local waterfalls and a soaring bird who sees all below from high above. Located at the bottom of a steep valley, Rjukan plays host to curious climatic phenomena. Within a single minute, entire clouds form and evaporate, simultaneously rising skyward and falling earthward. Storms come and go; a fog draped day gives way to blue skies. Paradoxically, since the valley blocks out direct sunlight for much of the year, Rjukan is one of the most sun-starved places in Norway, yet for the past century the town produced much of the country's need for electricity and light.

Above all, the video is filled with a sense of absence and of invisible forces underlying surface appearance. It is animated by a thrumming sense of energy, from the relentless drip, trickle and flow of water, to the steady whirring of plant turbines, to the humming of the high tension wires. Yet much of this impression of power and energy comes from the soundtrack by composer Bill Toles rather than from any depicted activity. The only human who appears is a solitary worker who vanishes, ghost-like, into thin air. The luxurious home featured in the video, the beneficiary of the light and power generated by the plant, is full of comfort but empty of people. It is also an illusion, a showplace home and office created by Norsk Hydro founder Sam Eyde to exemplify the good life that electrical energy would make possible and convince the public of the fledgling company's economic solvency.

This sense of illusion, of purposeful image-making, carries on in *The Heroes of Telemark*. The importance of the plant in Rjukan has



diminished in recent years, the result of Norsk Hydro's diversification and globalization, including the development of such other sources of energy as North Sea oil and natural gas. The company which had once employed 2,000 workers in Rjukan now employs only 300, most of them white-collar office workers and technicians. The men depicted in the light boxes are among the last physical laborers employed by the company. They pose before their homes—"trophies for decades of service"¹—exuding an air of stoic purpose that masks the precariousness of their situation.

The title of the series evokes another set of Norwegian heroes, glamorized by the 1965 film of the same name. These earlier "heroes of Telemark" were a group of resistance fighters who parachuted into Rjukan in 1943 and sabotaged the Norsk Hydro plant when it was commandeered by the Nazis during WWII to produce "heavy water," an element used to control fission in Germany's attempted development of an atomic bomb. The raid was a point of enormous national pride in Norway, counteracting the shame of the collaborationist government of Prime Minister Vidkun Quisling. The film, shot in Rjukan and starring Kirk Douglas and Richard Harris, extended the raid's fame to an international audience and created the type of intersection between fact and fiction that has been a central concern of Attie's art for more than a decade.

Attie uses the film's title and the aesthetics of commercial promotional photography to highlight the confluence of Norwegian corporate and national identity. "By photographing these Norwegian 'Marlboro Men,' I wanted to create images which question and ultimately challenge the construction of corporate and national identity and mythology. By having these individuals 'perform' the role of company and national hero, I wanted to raise questions as to the authenticity of these roles..."² In contrast to the resistance fighters lionized in film and in Norwegian national mythology, Attie's contemporary "heroes" are celebrated not for any courageous act of patriotism, but for the simple act of survival in the face of changing economic priorities.

The Rjukan project continues Attie's life-long fascination with the connection between past and present. "I am most interested in the relationship between place, memory and identity and how this relationship might be distilled and expressed through visual and aesthetic means,"³ he says. This interest first manifested itself in a series of public interventions in the city of Berlin. While in art school at San Francisco State University, Attie visited Berlin for the first time in 1990. "That dark morbid intensity of Berlin, plus the very palpable sense of history—both totally absent in California—really pulled me."⁴ Particularly compelling was the lost history of the city's Jewish

recently been filmed, Attie created a mock "Hollywood Walk of Fame," to underscore how sites related to the making of the film were being confused in the mind of the public with actual historic landmarks.

Upon his return to the United States in 1996, Attie's first important project was the 1998 *Between Dreams and History*, commissioned by the public art organization Creative Time for New York's Lower East Side. While the Lower East Side had been a predominantly Jewish neighborhood since the late 19th century (Attie's own maternal grandparents had lived there briefly upon emigrating from Syria in 1910), the area's recent history of immigration was more diverse. Rather than relying on archival images, Attie decided to use the recollections of the area's current residents. "These people are living," he said at the time, "I've got to do a project that gives voice to their memories while they're still alive."¹³ Attie interviewed over 75 residents of the Lower East Side, including Asian, Latino and Jewish immigrants, and distilled some 28 short texts from their recollections. Working with technical collaborator Norman Ballard, Attie used lasers to project the handwritten texts onto buildings at the corner of Rivington and Ludlow Streets. The words of the texts unscrolled letter-by-letter onto the buildings, as if they were being "written out of thin air"¹⁴ by an invisible pen. "What emerged is a kind of collective poetry, in which a Latino senior's recollection of a particular street corner related to a 15-year-old Asian youth's anxiety dream, which related to a very old Chinese poem, which then related to a Yiddish folk song."¹⁵

Attie returned to Europe in 2001 when he won a year-long fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. While there, he created another series of projections, *The History of Another*. Attie was intrigued by the fact that Rome was the only Western city in which Jews had lived continuously from antiquity to the present. His projections took place in Rome's historic Jewish Ghetto, a once walled-in area of town where, from 1555 to 1870, the city's Jewish population was locked in nightly. As he had in Berlin, Attie again turned to archival photographs of former residents of the quarter. But unlike the Berlin photos, where Attie had intentionally used images featuring traditionally-garbed Eastern Jews with beards and earlocks and signs in Hebrew, he purposely avoided using any photos that would identify the subjects as Jews. They became instead ghostly surrogates for any marginalized population, resigned to exile but yearning to belong to the city in which they lived. Since the Ghetto was located in the midst of ancient Rome, Attie projected many of his images onto the ruins of the ancient city. The projections (and their resultant photographs), thus merged together three distinct historical eras: antiquity, the turn of the 20th century (the photographs he used dated from 1880 to 1920), and the present. Attie shot his photographs of the interventions within a ten-minute crepuscular window, when the dying sun still tinged the sky blue and floodlights illuminated the ruins, but it was dark enough for the projections to be read clearly. As such Attie's phantoms recall the elegiac works of generations of painters such as Claude Lorraine, Hubert Robert, Camille Corot, and Thomas Cole, who came to Rome and painted contemporary inhabitants amidst the ruined grandeur of the past.

Attie is currently working on two forthcoming projects. One is a commission commemorating the 1993 Oslo Accords for the Nobel Peace Prize Center in Oslo, Norway. It was this long-term project that brought Attie to Norway

and indirectly led to the Rjukan works on view at MAM. While developing the MAM installation, Attie has also been working on a commission for the 40th anniversary of the mining disaster in Aberfan, Wales. In 1966, a mountain of waste material from the Aberfan coal mine avalanched down a hillside above the town and buried its elementary school, wiping out a generation of the village's children. Attie's Aberfan project will result in a book and an installation featuring portraits of local residents; its production is being filmed by the BBC for a documentary that will air in Britain this fall.

Says Attie, "I don't believe that the past is really ever over. I reject the separation between past and present. The past is always here."¹⁶ For him, history is an ongoing, evolving conversation between the past and the present. "Basically my job is to reflect back to the culture images of itself."¹⁷

— Peter Boswell, Assistant Director for Programs/Senior Curator

¹ Attie, Shimon. "The Heroes of Telemark: Hydro Allegories," project description sent to the author September 11, 2005.

² Ibid.

³ Attie, Shimon. "Preface," *Sites Unseen*. Burlington, VT: Verve Editions, 1998, p. 9.

⁴ Carr, C. "The Memory Wall: Shimon Attie Reveals the Collective Unconscious of the Lower East Side," *The Village Voice*, November 10, 1998.

⁵ Cudlin, Jeffrey. "Memory Pictures," *Washington City Paper*, April 1, 2005, np.

⁶ Ollman, Leah. "Projecting the Past onto the Present," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2000, Calendar pp. 59, 84.

⁷ Attie, Shimon. *Sites Unseen*, op.cit.

⁸ "Shimon Attie," www.eyestorm.com.

⁹ The *Scheunenviertel* has changed dramatically since the early 1990s and has become a fashionable neighborhood full of bars and restaurants.

¹⁰ Ollman, op.cit.

¹¹ Christian, Barbara. "CIA Exhibits Artist Shimon Attie's Images of Rome," *Currents*, Cleveland, November 2004, np.

¹² Attie, Shimon. *Sites Unseen*, op.cit.

¹³ Wallach, Amei. "Writing in Light on the Tenement Walls," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1998, pp. 107, 114.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hamilton, Anita. "Spiritual Graffiti," *Time Out*, New York, October 22, 1998, p. 53.

¹⁶ Ollman, op.cit.

¹⁷ Wallach, op.cit.

Shimon Attie is organized by Miami Art Museum and curated by Assistant Director for Programs/Senior Curator Peter Boswell as part of *New Work*, a series of projects by leading contemporary artists.

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Cover: Untitled, from *The Heroes of Telemark* 2006. Light box with Fujitrans transparency, 40 x 50 inches. **Inside:** 3 stills from *Light Under Night* 2005. Three-channel video installation with full-surround sound environment, 17 minutes; 97 *Joachimstraße 11a: Former Jewish café with patrons, 1933*, from *The Writing on the Wall* 1992. Ektacolor photograph, 20 x 24 inches. All photos courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



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Persistence of Memory

By means of dramatic on-site projections of archival photographs and written documents, Shimon Attie calls attention to “buried histories” obscured by the passage of time.

BY NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT

For more than two decades, the art of history painting has been rearing its head—a revival evident more often than not, however, in mediums other than painting. The photographic projections of Shimon Attie, recently the subject of a midcareer survey at the Boston ICA, fall squarely into this category. Attie is best known for his years-long exploration of the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust; the crux of the ICA exhibition was formed by photographs, video installations and light-box pieces documenting these projects. Like many other artists in the wake of Marcel Broodthaers, Attie is first and foremost an artist-anthropologist, a practitioner who digs into archives and then reconfigures his nonartistic source material into complicated art works. In doing so, he seeks to unearth a buried history for Jews in much the same way that Fred Wilson does for African-Americans. Moving through the show, visitors could also see Attie’s increasing involvement in a process of self-discovery, as he uses images from the recent past to explore his own history—communal, political and personal.

Born and raised in Los Angeles—a “now” town, an urban center that is ahistorical to its core—Attie initially studied psychology, but his interest in art and photography propelled him to art school at San Francisco State University. Immediately after completing his MFA in 1991, he moved to Berlin, exchanging the light of sunny California for what he calls “the dark morbidity of Berlin.” His obsession with the Holocaust since boyhood led him to a city that would wake him up, and he likens his self-imposed *Wanderjahre* to having “a bucket of cold water thrown at your face every morning.”¹

The early 1990s was a time of drastic change for this German metropolis, a period just after the fall of the Berlin Wall and before the long-divided city was reinstated as the capital of a unified Germany. Especially in the former East Berlin, it was a city still filled with ruins. Attie also entered a country that was increasingly willing to confront its anguished history. In West Germany, art relating to Nazism, the events of World War II and the Holocaust had become part of a tradition passed down from Joseph Beuys to Anselm Kiefer.² When Attie arrived in Berlin, the conflicted reactions to Germany’s Nazi past had become an increasingly important focus for contemporary art there, and was becoming part of the discourse of German

View of Shimon Attie’s slide projection Joachimstrasse/corner Auguststrasse: former Jewish resident, 1931, Berlin, 1992, from his “The Writing on the Wall” project, 1991-93. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, © Shimon Attie, courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Above, Present day refugee with dormitory ship ("Flotel Europa") used to house refugees in Copenhagen harbor, from the "Portraits of Exile" project, 1995, Duratrans photograph in submersible metal light box, 63 by 71 by 36 inches. Inset, view of the "Exile" light boxes in the Borsgraven Canal, Copenhagen. Photo Bent Ryberg.

museum exhibitions.³ This tradition has continued nonstop in the art of Georg Baselitz, Jochen Gerz, Wolfgang Flatz, Rosemarie Trockel and Katharina Sieverding, among others.

German artists often proved willing to deal with their own country's sordid histories and mythologies. But Attie, an American Jew, was curious about the buried history of Germany's lost Jews. In particular, his focus was on the lives of ordinary citizens, not on emblematic figures such as Kiefer's Shulamith or the anonymous annihilation that is the concern of much Holocaust-related art. Thus, Attie's subject matter filled a void in German art. His first major project, titled "The Writing on the Wall" (1991-93), attracted much attention in Germany as well as in the U.S., France and Great Britain. In the first instance of what would become his modus operandi, he scoured archives for photographs of Berlin's Jewish past, and then, in actions lasting one or two nights, projected the images back onto the generic urban architecture in the neighborhoods where they had originated. The eerie streets of Berlin now served as Attie's studio. The confrontation between the physicality of the contemporary present and the immateriality of the projected photographic past forms the key element of Attie's collagelike practice.

"The Writing on the Wall" concentrated on images of Jewish life in Berlin's Scheuenenviertel, the old neighborhood where the city's immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe had lived from the late 19th century until World War II. In his essay in the book accompanying the exhibition, James E. Young, author of *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*,



eloquently observes that Attie uses projection to reanimate the memory of specific individuals and places that no longer exist, hoping that "once seen, these projections will always haunt these sites by haunting those who have seen his projections."⁴ Domestic images become dramatic in these settings. One projection shows two Jewish urchins crouched on a stoop. The historical photograph of these two boys projected onto the doorway of an abandoned Berlin building calls attention to the harsh realities of today's cityscape. A construction scaffold sits next to the empty building, and next to it is a mound of dirt. Both the scaffold and the heap of fresh earth suggest new construction is in progress—an intimation that excavation and rebuilding will further bury Berlin's past. Through the projected black-and-white image—which becomes further removed and exaggerated in the color photograph that is both the documentation and the end product of

Attie's site work—we are propelled into a dream state. Conjuring memory and history, the work evokes tragedy.

These very theatrical tableaux also suggest the brooding atmosphere of Hollywood film noir. One of the best-known images from this series—and perhaps the most formally sophisticated and politically loaded—is a view of old Berlin apartments in which we see, projected onto a bricked-over window, a Star of David that appears above the head of a praying man. Important here is the way Attie uses the low angle to dramatize the crosslike appearance of the transoms and mullions in the windows of the looming nearby buildings. Thus he signals the age-old conflict between socially dominant Christianity and a Jewish microcosm, while playing off a fleeting projection of memory and an enduring architectural reality.

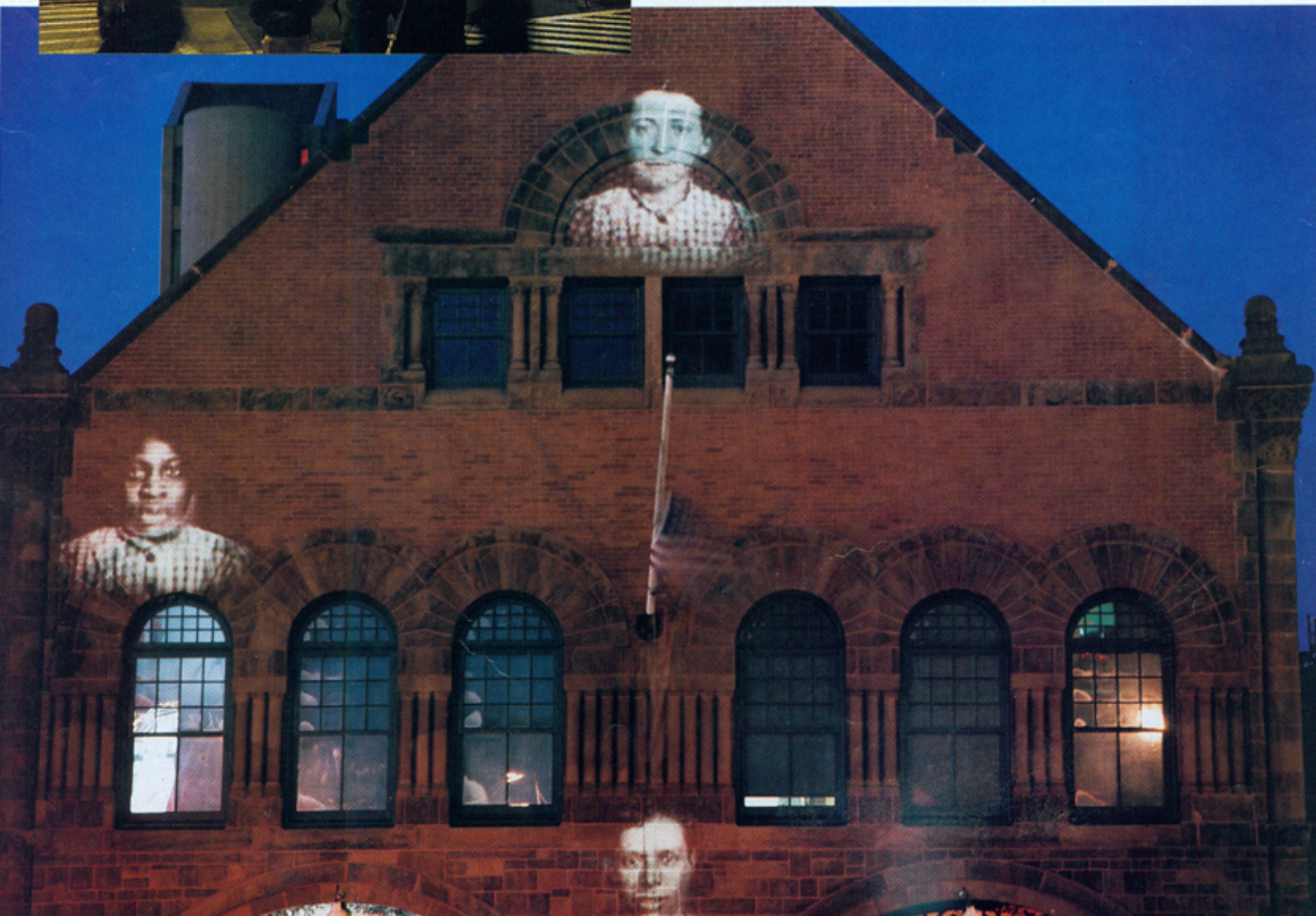


For a Copenhagen project, Attie juxtaposed the faces of Jews rescued during the Holocaust and those of recent political refugees denied Danish asylum.

In the years that followed, Attie continued to create analogous projects in Dresden, Cologne, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Kraków. For his 1993 installation "Trains," at the main railway station in Dresden, he projected onto the train tracks the faces of individuals murdered in the Holocaust. Once again, Attie created a double meaning for his projections in the way that the images appeared on the train's roof when it was in the station and on the tracks once the coach had departed. The visages on the top of the wagon made it seem that the victim pictured was being carried off, a device mimicking the train's role as a conveyance toward mass extermination. When seen on the tracks, however, the faces suggested a connection to suicide and to rare but dramatic railway fatalities. Simultaneously, such images spark a memory of the artificial, hyperdramatic scenes that portray fictional deaths and suicides in early film.

For his projections onto the exhibition hall of the Cologne Art Fair in 1995, Attie dispensed with human imagery altogether, and instead employed photos of furniture and other household objects. His aim in "Brick by Brick" was to recall the way that the Cologne Fair Building had served as a deportation

Below and inset, two views of "An Unusually Bad Lot," 1999-2000, archival mug shots projected onto the facade of the Institute of Contemporary Art building (a former police station), Boston.





In the series “Untitled Memory,” the artist’s domestic space is filled with images from his own past; in them lurks a mysterious melancholy.

site for Jewish, Sinti and Roma families and others during the Third Reich, and as a warehouse and auction site for their seized property. The focus on the material goods of a bygone era, via images projected onto the brick pillars surrounding the entryway to the hall that hosts the art fair, suggested a troubling connection with the sale of the art works inside. In showing the modest domestic objects that became Nazi confiscated goods (many of which still circulate as antiques in Germany today), and in showing as well the period ads that publicized the auctions through which the Nazis sold these goods, Attie presciently reflected the controversies that were just emerging about the legal ownership of art looted during World War II.⁵

Attie’s work in Copenhagen in 1995 was politicized by the human faces that he chose to highlight. Here he opted to present not only the visages of Jews rescued by the Danes during the Holocaust but also those of political refugees from the Balkans, Africa and Asia who were denied asylum in Denmark during the 1990s. Images of these faces were placed in nine light boxes that were submerged in the Danish capital’s central canal, through which all the refugees had passed. In doing so, Attie showed Denmark—a country rightfully proud of its successful effort to evacuate most of its Jewish community to safety in Sweden in 1943—to be resting on its humanitarian laurels, seemingly incapable of similar gestures at present.

It was not until his project in Kraków, Poland, in 1996 that Attie, the former Los Angelino, commented upon the superficial strategies of hype and celebrity promotion that characterize Los Angeles’s film and television industry. His “Walk of Fame” is a commentary on the brisk tourist business that has arisen in Kraków—a former Polish capital where a thriving Jewish community existed by the late Middle Ages—around sites used by Steven Spielberg in filming *Schindler’s List*. Attie claims his project was meant to comment upon the guided tours of the movie locations and not on Spielberg’s film, and for this work he employed neither film nor photographic images. Instead, Attie ironically borrowed a motif from the Hollywood “Walk of Fame” that pays tribute to the film industry’s own celebrities.⁶ In the square in front of Kraków’s Old Synagogue (one of the locations used by Spielberg), he set 24 lapidary memorials—simulated five-pointed terrazzo stars distressed so as to make them look historical. Onto these he emblazoned the names of Jews whose names had appeared on the real Schindler’s list. In substituting the five-pointed stars for the usual six-pointed ones Jews were forced to wear during the Third Reich, Attie suggests the uneasy mechanism by which Hollywood has contributed to making celebrities of victims.

Attie moved back to San Francisco in November 1996, ending his five-year European sojourn and with it his unrelenting attention to the events of Europe’s tragic 20th century. His projects, which had been meant as a corrective to forgotten and lost histories, ultimately uncovered the way this traumatic past has come to be mythologized, and the means through which its sober moral message often has been distorted. His move back to the U.S. permitted a therapeutic distance from Holocaust-related matters and freed him to take on issues having to do with his sense of self.

Attie continued to apply the techniques he had pioneered in his Berlin and

Left, view of “Walk of Fame,” 1996, 24 digital C-prints mounted on aluminum plates, each 31 1/2 inches square; installed near a site used for the filming of Schindler’s List, Szeroka Street, Kraków.

Opposite, two images from “Untitled Memory,” 1998, Ektachrome photographs recording life-size slide projections of friends Thomas P. (top) and Armand V. (bottom), in the artist’s former San Francisco apartment, 40 by 47 inches each.





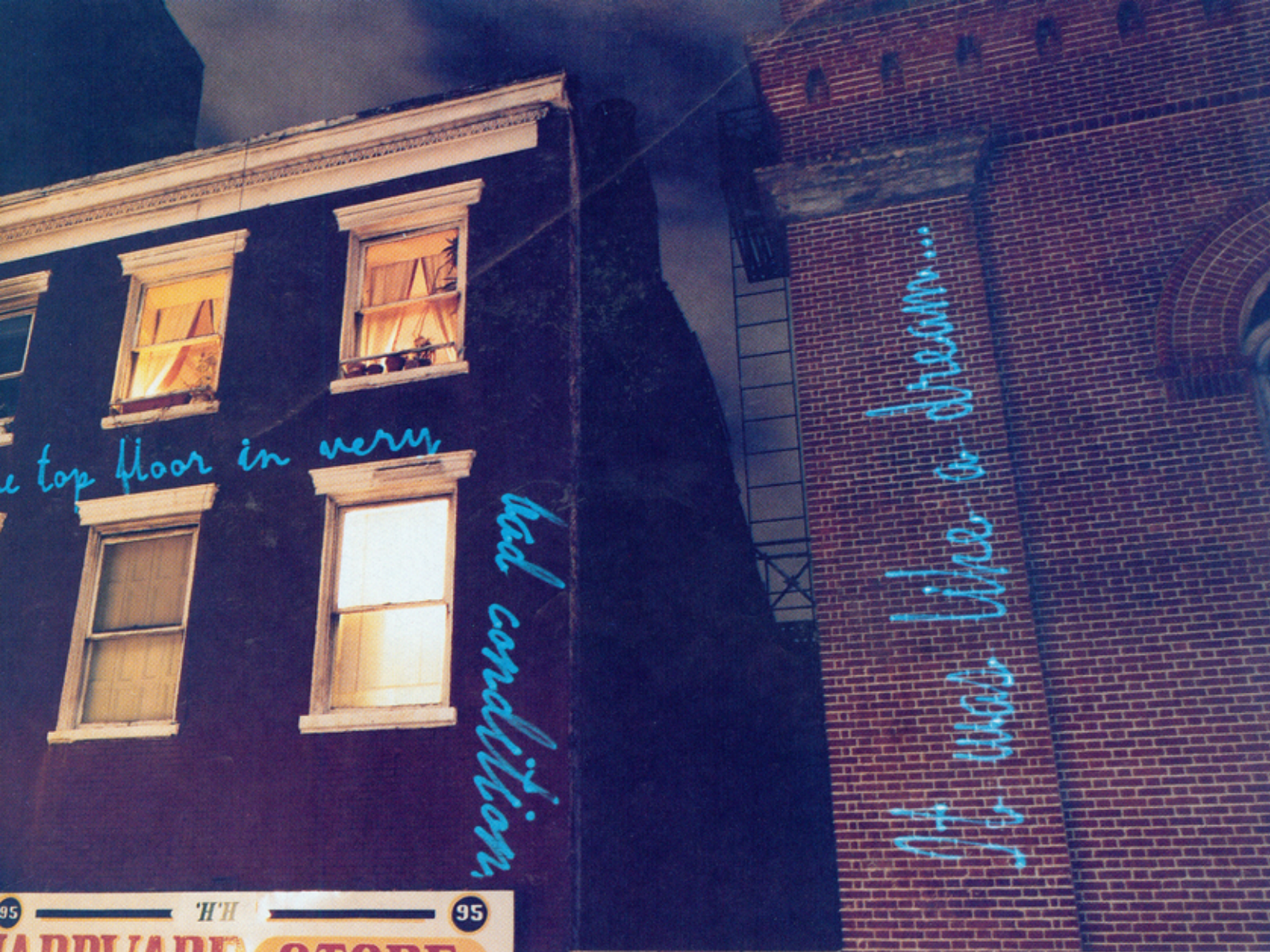
For his Lower East Side project, Attie worked with subjects from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, embracing the diversity of a once-Jewish neighborhood.

subsequent installations to unveil the memories of his own past lurking in his former apartment in San Francisco. For the series "Untitled Memory," he projected images from old personal photographs and rephotographed the projections in the present emptiness of his onetime digs. Old friends and lovers appear, as does his new partner, the artist Thomas Pihl. The San Francisco series (which was given its final representational form only in 1998), was presented in the last gallery of the ICA survey; it marks the first time that Attie's work articulates his position as a gay man. He shows his domestic space populated with the presence of everyday life; yet in these dreamlike images lurks a mysterious melancholy, one that transforms people into symbolic objects, as if they were memento mori. Upon arriving in Berlin, Attie had fallen into the "German fascination" with the Holocaust and World War II; on returning to America he entered into a world transfixed by questions of identity, where multiculturalism held sway. Without missing a beat, Attie began to reflect these concerns in his work.

This working through of his own past led to his move to New York City in October 1997 and his remarkably successful, highly publicized project

"Between Dreams and History" of 1998. Under the auspices of the arts organization Creative Time, Attie interviewed Latino, Chinese and Jewish senior residents of Manhattan's Lower East Side and, using nighttime laser projections, inscribed their most poignant memories on the walls of four buildings at the intersection of Ludlow and Rivington Streets. Whereas in Cologne Attie had replaced human images with images of objects, in this project he abandoned visual imagery entirely, substituting written excerpts from his interviews. Deploying techniques he had developed in his earlier training as a psychologist, he was able to glean from the local inhabitants their simple yet profound observations about their earlier years in the neighborhood. As with his Danish project, Attie embraced subjects from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, this time to underscore the present diversity of a once-Jewish neighborhood. In this way he sought to expand the reach of earlier multicultural explorations by artists, which often focused on a single ethnic or gender identity.

Attie's newest project, commissioned in conjunction with his Boston ICA exhibition, probes the history of the ICA building, a former police station dating from the turn of the 20th century. In "An Unusually Bad Lot," Attie projects mug shots and written reports from the police archives of that period onto the facade of the ICA building. These documents demonstrate the stereotyping of "sexual deviants" such as prostitutes and homosexuals. In the arrest reports and courtroom transcripts, for example, living together without being married is called "lewd and lascivious cohabitation" and having gay sex labeled "committing a lewd and lascivi-



View of "Between Dreams and History," 1998, laser-text projection of excerpts from interviews with neighborhood residents; at Ludlow and Rivington Streets, Lower East Side, New York.

ous act upon one another." One of Attie's recycled quotes, "She did not seem to feel the least shame for being arrested for fornication, not even with a colored man," shows how an alleged crime was aggravated when racial lines were crossed. Drawing on a variety of "professional" sources—from arresting officers to judges to social workers—Attie reveals the unexamined prejudices that structure their thinking.

Because Attie's best-known work deals with an unusually dramatic subject, the Holocaust, critical discussion of his art has often concentrated on the historical events to which he refers. As a result, his esthetic strategies have seldom received the full attention they deserve. Like Pepón Osorio and Jeff Wall, Attie creates baroque tableaux; and like Wall, he uses photography as his primary medium. Attie is also an admirer of the purely formal beauty of James Turrell's works, which use light to reorient the viewer's physical relation to space. Attie's projections are more likely to unsettle the viewer's temporal sense, thanks to the overlay of images of the past and present.

Working in the space between installation and photography, Attie self-consciously confounds the role and meaning of historical testimony. The ambiguous relation between absence and presence, between physicality and ephemerality, is central to his art. The archival photos and texts that he employs are the building blocks of his work. Yet the viewer is constantly aware that if one pulls the plug, the projected image vanishes. Because of the transitory nature of his projections, it is the exhibited photographs of his site work that remain as the tangible result and the enduring documents of his projects. □

1. Conversation with the artist, Jan. 4, 2000.
2. Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 13-16.
3. Cornelia Gockel, *Zeige deine Wunde: Faschismusrezeption in der deutschen Gegenwartskunst*, Munich, Silke Verlag, 1998. This book deals specifically with the history of this phenomenon in Germany.
4. James E. Young, "Sites Unseen: Shimon Attie's Acts of Remembrance 1991-1996," in *Sites Unseen—Shimon Attie: European Projects. Installations and Photographs*, Burlington, Vt., Verve Editions, 1998, p. 10.
5. The debate was spurred by the publication of Hector Feliciano's *Le Musée Disparu*, Paris, Atril, 1995. This book appeared in November 1995 and was widely discussed in Europe at the time. This is precisely the same date as Attie's Cologne project. I thank Didier Schulman of the Centre Georges Pompidou for this information. Lynn H. Nicholas's *The Rape of Europe: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York, Knopf) appeared in the previous year.
6. On the issue of Jewishness and celebrity, see Carol Ockman, "When Is a Jewish Star Just a Star? Interpreting Images of Sarah Bernhardt," in *The Jew in the Text*, Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb, eds., London, Thames and Hudson, 1995.

"*Sites Unseen—Shimon Attie: Photographs and Public Projects, 1992-1998*" was curated by Ellen Fleurov. The exhibition opened at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art (Nov. 17, 1999-Jan. 16, 2000) and traveled to the museum of the California Center for the Arts, Escondido (Feb. 13-May 7). The show was accompanied by a 120-page book, *Sites Unseen—Shimon Attie: European Projects. Installations and Photographs*.

Author: Norman L. Kleeblatt is curator of fine arts at The Jewish Museum, New York City.

ARTnewsmag

March 28, 2011

Video

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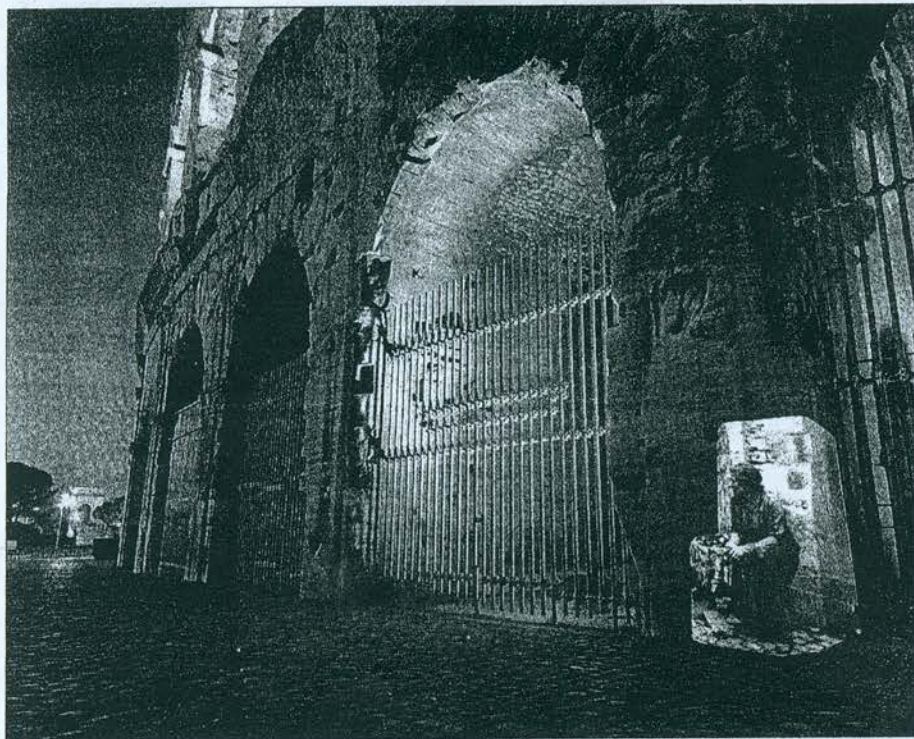
[Attie](#)



Reading Between the Lines:

Israelis and Palestinians who share the status of being New Yorkers on 4 of the 8 screens in Shimon Attie's video installation *MetroPAL.IS.*, at The [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#). The participants, who appear as their "New York selves," perform a document composed of a mixture of the Israeli and Palestinian declarations of independence.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



At the Colosseum (Looking Towards the Arch of Titus), Lambda print, 2002

Memory Pictures

By Jeffrey Cudlin

"Shimon Attie:
The History of Another"
At Numark Gallery to April 9

Shimon Attie clearly knows a thing or two about working within other people's guidelines. As a recipient of the 2001-2002 Rome Prize, Attie took an 11-month residency at the city's American Academy, where, as the prize's Web site explains, artists are asked to "examine firsthand the source of Western humanistic heritage, and to engage in a dialogue with Rome's culture." So traditional an assignment—the original Prix de Rome, after all, was founded by Louis XIV back in 1666—might seem like a mismatch for many contemporary artists, particularly for Attie. His work crosses the boundaries of performance, photography, and sculpture, never quite belonging to any of the three. Although he's meticulous about his process, he seems to view art as a generalist, conceptualist activity—not exactly sketching statuary at the Palazzo Barberini.

More important, the 40-something Los Angeleno has a very specific subject matter that at first blush hardly seems to lend itself to the landmark city of classical antiquity. A secular Jew, Attie is fascinated with displaced peoples and marginalized populations, and much of his work attempts to give form, as he says, to "the singular presence of the absent."

In his *Writing on the Wall* project from the early '90s, for example, Attie went to a Berlin neighborhood once populated by poor Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. He found photos of these former residents and projected them onto the façades of the very buildings they once occupied. Photo documents of those projections show an eerie collision of a previously obscured past and an insistent present; they are, as one Judaic scholar has described Attie's work, "after-images of the Holocaust."

Attie's efforts to integrate this approach into the strictures of the Rome Prize—to converse with that city on his own terms—are documented in his current exhibition at Numark Gallery, "Shimon Attie: The History of Another." The show includes 14 poster-sized photographs from his Italian adventure, along with two additional prints from his Berlin series. At its best, this work dismantles our notions of the fixity of history and place by suggesting the narratives that lie hidden beneath the surface of everyday things.

Take the 72-inch-by-84-inch *Looking Onto Temple of Apollo* (2002): Three much-abused columns—one more or less intact, another missing its capital, a third lopped off near its base—loom in the lower-left-hand corner of the picture, emphatic in their chalky whiteness. To the right, a narrow archway is suffused in a supernaturally golden glow; unexpectedly, a piano covered with a bright-blue

plastic tarp sits underneath the arch. In the middle of the picture, temporary metal barriers thread their way between the ruins, regulating foot traffic through the site. Clustered around this monument are structures that look like ordinary apartment buildings, but they tend to shrink away from the viewer, not possessing the same high-wattage splendor as the fragmentary temple. Attie's projected figure in this piece, a young boy, is on the outside looking in. He stands in the lower right; we see him from behind, rendered in a ghostly black-and-white. It's quite a contrast from the rest of the picture, but one that's compositionally thrilling; the eye bounces along from one upheaval of light and color to the next.

It's tempting to think that Attie is having a bit of fun with Photoshop: Everywhere in his work, ancient monuments are bathed in a heavenly yellow that contrasts sharply with the impossibly rich blue of the sky or with the dim, misty shadows that enshroud surrounding buildings. But this palette indicates no postproduction sleight of hand. It turns out that in Rome, as in Washington, spotlights are used to direct visitors' attention to the city's monuments to "Western humanistic heritage." Attie attempted to capture the moments shortly after these lights turned on a dusk. "There was only a ten-minute window when I would have the right balance between different elements, the sun having gone down but the sky still glowing a lumi-

nous blue, while at the same time dark enough to show the projections," he tells us in the show's press release.

Now there's an old trope, and one not just of the West: Ghosts come out at night, bringing the past frighteningly into the present. Attie makes the most of this association: With his arms spread wide, the boy of *Temple of Apollo* leans forward against what could be a wall—or a sarcophagus. Against his grainy, high-contrast form, the nearby monument nearly hums with light, appearing to have been transplanted into his cool, shadowy city from a much brighter, warmer place and time. Similarly, in *At the Colosseum (Looking Towards the Arch of Titus)* (2002), a tired young Jewish woman is uncannily integrated into the scene, appearing to lean back against the Colosseum itself. She looks at the entrance to her right, peering uncertainly after the promise of activity just beyond a tall metal gate that glints as if gilt.

Both of these figures were taken from pictures of Jews living in Rome circa 1900—unassimilated immigrants, living on the periphery of the city and its history. The Colosseum, after all, was begun by Vespasian, the emperor responsible (along with his son, Titus) for the deaths of a half-million or so residents of Jerusalem around A.D. 70—a conspicuous early holocaust—and was likely paid for in part, some historians suggest, with plunder from Judea. As Clement Greenberg once insisted, the history of gentiles is profane to the Jews. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, they've stood outside of it; gentile history, as Greenberg put it, "tends to no Jewish solution, remains meaningless vicissitude, without place or interest for the genuinely human." Attie underscores the otherness of his ciphers, yet he also suggests that they were caught between being resigned to exile and yearning to truly belong to the city in which they once lived—ghosts in life as well as in death.

Of course, as Attie presents it, the place they're yearning for hardly resembles the image of Rome promulgated by the American Academy. It looks instead like any messy urban center: Older buildings crumble; new developments founder; the occasional inglorious stump of some monument or other punctuates the whole. With only the barest manipulation on his part, Attie is constantly finding bizarre vistas of pasted-together masonry, fencing, and stage lighting. *At Portico of Octavia* (2002), for instance, presents a group of overlapping gold and blue columns seen through a distant, darkened archway. Undulating orange webs of plastic construction fencing rush from the middle distance into the foreground at the lower right, following the architecture and reminding the viewer of

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Gates* and their industrial-strength saffron. Additional fencing, made of jagged wire, climbs above this barrier; together, they cast unearthly shadows across the ground.

We can almost believe that these aren't construction materials at all. They look like a deliberate artistic intervention, a pitting of present-day plastic against hallowed masonry to see what aesthetic sparks might fly. But Attie's only alteration of the site is modest: the image of a diminutive female figure projected against the pier of an arch. She wears a long skirt and folds her arms across her chest. The present moment is as inaccessible to her as this monument must be to any passing tourist, thanks to the redundant fences. Limits, barriers, and dislocations—Attie has found in them all a compelling metaphor for the story of the Jews and their troubled relation to any place they've occupied in the Diaspora.

In this city constantly under construction, Attie is building monuments of his own. Unlike Rome's weathered protrusions of stone raked by artificial light, Attie's commemorations are made of light itself and are thus as ephemeral as the all too brief window in which he makes his photographs. These fleeting acts are so different in tone from the Roman ruins—quite "genuinely human," as Greenberg might have it. Consider *At Temple of Fortuna* (2002), in which an isolated fragment of ancient brickwork occupies the center of the picture. It's dramatically backlit and seems to rise out of the darkness. Attie projects onto this forbidding tomb a young boy who dangles his feet over its edge. He seems to examine an excavation to his right, apparently marveling at the forgotten places deep inside the earth. This boy is not an emblem of history as written by the victors; he is a sudden flash of counterpoint, a much needed sign of regret for the cost of empire.

Attie's act points to the post-modern idea that history is a discourse, not a simple narrative. Without discourse—without difference—there is only suppression and destruction. Attie's memorials, then, are a necessary correction, though the sheer aesthetic pleasure his vistas provide—their shimmering golds, deep blues, and carefully integrated figures—may seem troubling given their intent. Theodor Adorno famously asked whether art was even possible after the Holocaust, if one could wrestle with the fact of Auschwitz without trivializing or profaning it. Attie, apparently, feels compelled to create no matter what the risks. In doing so, he's revealed a chorus of difference underneath the surface and discovered something distinctive about Rome's relation to its residents, both permanent and transient. Unlike the traditional historical markers of Rome, Attie's art is shockingly impermanent, deeply personal, and ironically beautiful—much more like life itself. **CP**

The New York Times

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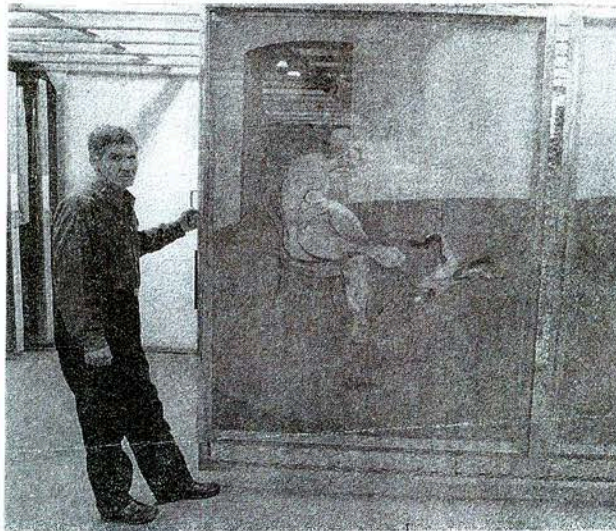
NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2004

Weekend FINE ARTS LEISURE

The New York Times

INSIDE ART

Carol Vogel



Two panels from a 1968 Francis Bacon triptych at the Museum of Co

Asked if officials at the Tate were concerned about the safety of artworks being sent to Iran, Sir Nicholas Serota, director of all the Tate galleries, said, "As the British Council is the cultural arm of the Foreign Office, we are happy to be advised by them concerning security and safety issues."

Jewish Museum at 100

The Jewish Museum in Manhattan is gearing up to celebrate its 100th anniversary this month. In addition to special exhibitions and programs, it has commissioned Shimon Attie, an American installation artist and photographer, to create a work especially for the event. He has decided to create an environment that will change throughout 2004. The first chapter, as he calls it, will be unveiled on Jan. 21.

"We were looking for someone who could deal with history, and Shimon has this wonderful way of bringing the past into the present," said Joan Rosenbaum, the museum's director. "We were intrigued by the idea that he wanted to create a visual dialogue using a range of the collection."

Together with Norman Ballard, a laser artist who specializes in new-media art installations and theatrical special effects, Mr. Attie has created a darkened hexagon-shaped enclosure in which images from the

museum's collection will be projected three dimensionally with texts from the museum's archives, which will be written in laser light as if by an unseen hand. The entire presentation, in a gallery on the museum's third floor, will last about 20 minutes.

"The two media create a ghostly aesthetic that hovers between presence and absence, the material and the ethereal," Mr. Attie said. He has not determined when the other chapters will be installed.

The objects Mr. Attie has chosen range from a biblical-era stone weight from 600 B.C. to a 20th-century Pop Art painting. The texts will make use of a wide range of material, too, from art reviews to private correspondence and staff memos. By the end of the year, Mr. Attie said, about 16 objects from the collection will have been in the three-dimensional display. "For viewers it's a full-immersion environment," he said. "By telling the story of four objects at a time, we're collapsing thousands of miles of time, space and geography and letting the objects speak."

While the museum already has work by Mr. Attie in its permanent collection, it hopes to add this one to its holdings. But Ms. Rosenbaum said its fate "remains to be seen."

"We'll have a year to live with this work," she added. "And we hope there's a donor out there who will give it to us."

ARTtalk



A model of Shimon Attie and Norman Ballard's installation mapping the planet.

Universal Studio

Artist **Shimon Attie** and laser-technology guru **Norman Ballard** have been given free reign to fiddle with government satellite data. The dry-sounding organization concerned with all things wet, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), invited them to create a permanent installation inside the new Satellite Operations Facility in Suitville, Maryland, which began construction in February. So the duo designed a version of the earth that has more to do with imagination than scientific observation.

The installation will consist of a spherical chamber that is big enough for ten people. Hovering at its center will be a three-dimensional globe formed from digitally manipulated satellite images of the planet, normally used by NOAA to analyze weather and environmental conditions. On the nearby walls, a laser light projector will write out ruminations on the universe, quoting people ranging from Copernicus to Sigmund Freud to NASA astronauts.

"It's not meant to be educational," says Attie.

"Rather, we want to show how multilayered and profound man's perspective of the earth actually is." The General Services Administration, which oversees construction of most federal

buildings, has allotted \$200,000—0.5 percent of the estimated cost of the building—for the installation. Scheduled to open in spring 2005, the building will be accessible to the public by appointment.

—Meredith Mendelsohn

Art in America

June 2002

Shimon Attie at Jack Shainman

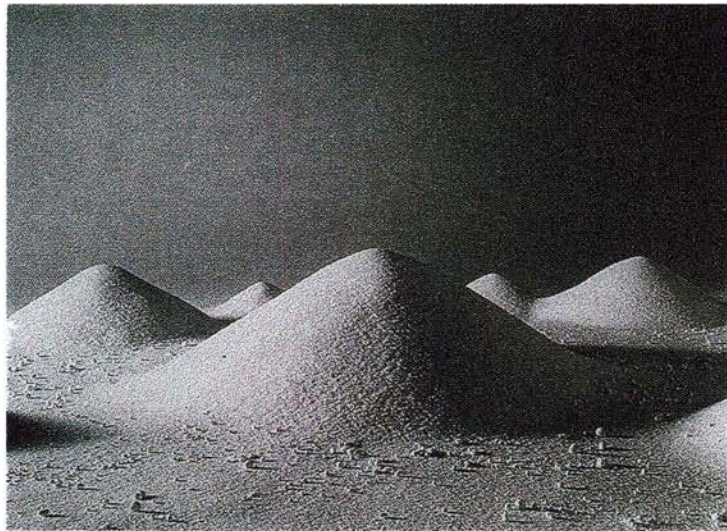
Shimon Attie is perhaps best known for his public-art projects, in which he has projected archival photographs or written texts onto the facades of buildings in Berlin, New York and other cities. His recent show was an example of the more personal side of his oeuvre, turning away from the collective realms of history and urban space and toward the hermetic world of the body. The show, "White Nights, Sugar Dreams," was inspired by Attie's interviews with diabetes sufferers

and by his own experiences with the disease. It consisted of 11 very large, untitled chromogenic prints, each showing a highly magnified image of blood, sugar or a combination of the two substances. The austere, predominantly red-and-white photographs, displayed in plain white frames, imbued the gallery with a hospital-like ambiance. But this clinical aura was belied by the images' uncanny qualities, which asserted themselves gradually.

While several pictures of undulating mounds of sugar inevitably suggested landscapes, most of the photographs were abstract and ambiguous; they exuded a sense of glacial inscrutability. One depicted a field of sugar crystals stained here and there with pinkish, watery-looking drops of blood. In another, small

white blobs with short, cometlike tails seemed to whiz back and forth in front of a scarlet background. Two 48-by-60-inch photographs were nearly identical—each showed a perfectly round pile of sugar sitting pristinely on a scarlet ground—but in the first picture, the sugar was pure, snowy white, while in the second it was soaked with blood and had taken on a dark maroon color. There was a palpable quality to the images that was heightened by the glossy hyperclarity of the prints. The sugar looked sweet and tantalizing, and the blood looked unnervingly rich. Collectively, these images provoked a helpless fluctuation between attraction and dread—an oscillation that, perhaps, mimics the ambivalence that we feel toward our own bodies when they become the sites of pathology or disease.

—Elizabeth Schambelan



Shimon Attie: Untitled from the series "White Nights, Sugar Dreams," 2000, Lambda C-print, 30 by 40 inches; at Jack Shainman.

Art in America

Shimon Attie at Jack Shainman and Rivington Street

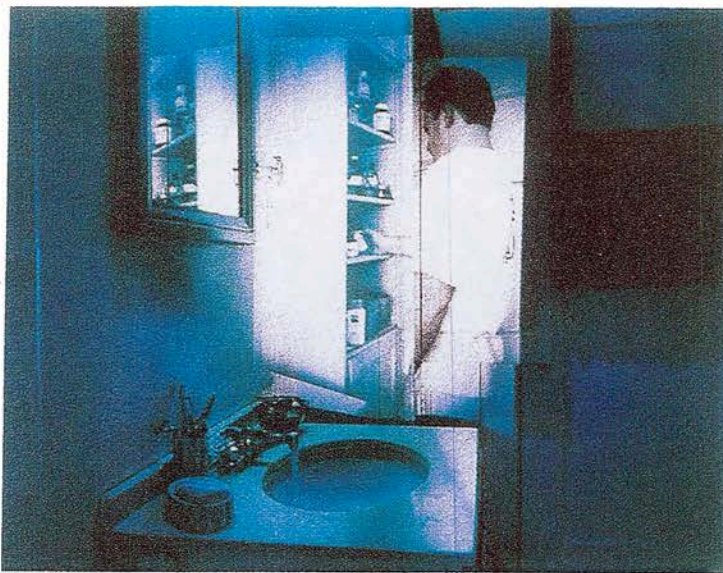
"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," begins a poem by Robert Frost about a stone wall between neighbors. The line is called to mind by the work of Shimon Attie, for whom walls do not so much divide as bring distant things together. In his *Writing on the Wall* (1992-93), for example, the walls in Berlin's Scheuenviertel neighborhood, the old Jewish ghetto, became a site where past and present converged when Attie slide-projected photographs of prewar Jewish life onto them, sometimes onto the very spot at which a photo was originally taken. By photographing the projections in long, meditative exposures (three

to four minutes, needed to record the image in low-light conditions), Attie documented these fleeting reunions, echoing both the preservation and the loss which the archival photographs themselves represent.

Footage from other European projects, compiled in a video called *Sites Unseen*, was on view at Jack Shainman, along with 10 new Ektacolor photographs from the series "Untitled Memory." The photographs employ the same technique used in the Berlin event, this time superimposing black-and-white projected images of friends, lovers and family onto the exact space in Attie's home where they had been taken as much as 20 years before. The bare interiors of the house have remained surprisingly unchanged, giving the photographs a glacial, eerie quality. The ghostly figures appear in a halo of light, some hovering above the floor as in *Untitled Memory (Projection of Ruth A.)*, others sliding off the couch into thin air as does one of the women in *Untitled Memory (Projection of Catherine W. and Loretta G.)*. In all but one photograph there is no view onto the outside world—the blinds are drawn, doors closed—so that Attie has created an enclosed, self-referential space where memory does not disrupt but rather reinforces the sense of presence. This is Attie's most personal, intimate work to date. Although it is successful, it has less resonance than some of his public projects.

Happily, his most recent public project, *Between Dreams and History*, also his first in the U.S., was simultaneously on view on

the cross streets of Ludlow and Rivington on the Lower East Side. Sponsored by Creative Time, Attie had residents of the neighborhood write down thoughts and memories. He wove the lines—in English, Yiddish, Chinese and Spanish—into a poetic text that was lasered in aqua-blue handwriting across the tenement houses and the Ludlow Synagogue. Here, as always in Attie's work, we are reminded that those who read the writing on the wall find not a forecast of the future but an epic memory. —Nicole Krauss



Shimon Attie: *Untitled Memory (Projection of John S.)*, 1998, Ektacolor photograph, 40 by 50 inches; at Jack Shainman.

Art & Architecture

Projecting the Past Onto the Present

By superimposing prewar images on modern sites, Shimon Attie attempts to capture a haunting time.

By LEAH OILMAN

It was Shimon Attie's father who taught him, at an early age, "the importance of not looking away from what has gone before." But how exactly can one see something that has passed, that is no longer there in a recognizable, tangible way? Reflecting on history is one thing, but actually seeing it is something else.

Attie has more than managed. For the past decade, the photographer and installation artist has devised extraordinarily potent methods of transforming evanescent memories into vivid visual experiences.

In Berlin, he projected photographic images of Jewish street life before World War II onto the scarred surfaces of the former Jewish neighborhood where those scenes transpired. In Copenhagen, he submerged nine large light-boxes with photographic transparencies several feet underwater in a canal running through the center of the city. The faces that hovered just under the undulating surface belonged to Danish Jews rescued during the war, as well as to current Eastern European refugees seeking asylum in Denmark. In New York, Attie interviewed residents of the Lower East Side about their dreams and memories, then used laser light to write out fragments of their texts, in the immigrants' own languages and handwriting, on the walls of neighborhood apartment buildings.

These and several other projects are documented and reprised in a museum setting in the show "Sites Unseen: Shimon Attie—Photographs and Public Projects, 1992-1998," opening today at the California Center for the Arts in Escondido. Attie spoke about the show, his first museum survey, by telephone from his home in Brooklyn, where he's lived for the past two years. "The East Coast," he says, "is a compromise between California and Europe. It's American, but the sense of history is European."

He also keeps a home in San Francisco, where he settled more than 20 years ago.

Belonging to at least two places is characteristic of Attie, 42: fluidity is the operative condition of his life and work. Superimposing images from the past onto the surfaces of the present, he complicates the visual, psychological, political and social texture of everyday life wherever he stages his "interventions."

"What I'm responding to is places, and sites. There is some kind of confluence between witnessing, on the part of personal experience, and excavating, bringing to the surface stories that are embedded in the architecture or cityscape."

Born in Los Angeles—"which for my family was almost ahistorical," he says—Attie headed to Northern California to study psychology at UC Berkeley. Two years after he graduated, he earned a master's degree in clinical psychology from Antioch University. For the next seven or eight years, he maintained a psychotherapy practice in San Francisco while he attended art school, spending a few days of every week at the office, and the rest at his studio.

"It was the same sort of sensibility or predisposition that led me to both [psychology and art]," he says. But it isn't a case of one discipline being driven by the other: "Both areas are influenced by who I am."

In the summer of 1990, before his last year in the master's program in fine arts at San Francisco State University, Attie traveled to Berlin to do a project he called "Surface Anatomy." Working with the idea of Berlin as a city that had been divided and was starting to come together, he projected medical illustrations of surgery and suturing onto buildings in eastern and western Berlin that had been damaged in the war and never repaired. "I borrowed a medical metaphor to describe a political process," he says of the project.

After receiving his degree, he returned to Berlin, drawn back to the

city by "the palpable sense of history that's felt on every block," and energized by the contrast between comfortable San Francisco and edgy Berlin. He expected to stay four months and ended up living there for six years.

"Being Jewish was the engine for the whole thing. It was almost like a counter-phobic fascination. What's ground zero for the Third Reich? I went right into the lion's den."

Though his immediate family did not suffer in the Holocaust—his maternal grandfather emigrated from Germany before the war, his paternal grandparents came from Syria—many family friends were survivors. Attie's father felt a connection to the collective loss and passed that sensibility, as well as an attitude of vigilance against bigotry of all kinds, onto his son. Absence became a palpable force in Attie's understanding of his culture and the world. With the framework provided by his father, Attie started, at age 10 or 12, he says, to fill in the details on his own, checking out books about the Holocaust from the library and reading himself to sleep.

When he returned to Berlin in 1991, he steeped himself in the amorphous presence of the city's vanished Jewish culture. Combing through archives, he gathered prewar photographs of kosher butcher shops, schools and bookstores in the Scheunenviertel, the quarter where Russian and Polish Jews settled in the early 20th century, retaining their small-town ways and appearances in the big city. Not many of the original sites of the photographs survived wartime bombing or postwar rebuilding, but Attie was able to match exact locations for about a quarter of the photographs he selected.

Working from "the discrepancy between what I felt and what I did not see," Attie projected slides made from the photographs onto walls and doorways in the former Jewish quarter, repopulating the neighborhood, a few nights at a time, with spectral reminders of its former inhabitants, most of whom had been deported and killed.

Visitors to the Escondido show—which was organized by museum director Ellen Fleurov for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, where it originated—will experience the Berlin project "Writing on the Wall" in the form of photographic transparencies displayed in wall-mounted light-boxes in an otherwise totally darkened room. For "The Neighbor Next Door," a 1995 project staged in Amsterdam, Attie mounted projectors in the windows of homes that sheltered Jews during the war, and projected onto the street below archival footage of German soldiers, passing funerals and military bands. The project is only visible in the current exhibition through slits in a wall.

"It puts you in the position of looking out, from being in hiding," Attie explains. The project probes, in its oblique way, the reputation of the Dutch as heroic shelterers of the Jews, based largely on the iconic power of the Anne Frank story. In fact, Attie points out, nearly 80% of Amsterdam's Jews—all "neighbors next door"—were deported and killed, betrayed.

Artists who address issues of the Holocaust face a subject so daunting and immense that it can easily dwarf any effort to comment on it or interpret it. Attie treads lightly, resists any presumptuous attempts at closure, and personalizes the loss without undue melodrama. "I don't work in a didactic way," he says. "I want people to draw their own conclusions."

His projects in public spaces have consistently generated a good deal of response, and in Berlin, particularly, he met with some resistance from older residents of the formerly Jewish neighborhood. But, he notes, what people experienced "first and foremost, was an aesthetic response. People would walk by and see something beautiful—maybe hauntingly beautiful, but beautiful. That's important to me. They would have a visceral response. Then the content would sink in, and that would be a different matter, because sometimes the content is painful. I'm not in politics, or a historian. I'm working as an artist. My work gets at some of the same issues, but using a different language."

Despite the complex technical means necessary to execute his public projects, Attie's work comes across as poignantly understated. It seeps into the consciousness, then it, too, passes into memory. "The appearance of a spectral image image for a few nights—the memory of that lives on longer in the imagination than something that's static and permanent," he says.

Attie's work is both haunting and permanent," he says.

What accounts for the endurance and density of Attie's work is its layering of sources and approaches: past atop present, translucent overlaid onto opaque, black-and-white colliding with color, truth challenging myth. In his public projects, he connects a past situation with a present condition. With "The Neighbor Next Door," Attie hoped the work would also bring to mind in its Dutch viewers the thousands of illegal immigrants currently living in hiding in Amsterdam, at the mercy of the government's policy toward political and economic refugees.

"The connection between the historical situation and the present condition is really important," he insists. "I don't believe that the past is really ever over. I reject the separation between past and present. The past is always here." □

Leah Oilman is a frequent contributor to Calendar.



Attie's "Alameda" above shows the projection of 1920s Hebrew bookstores on a building in 1992 Berlin. "Writing on the Wall" (Projection of Thomas P.) from 1996 is also in the exhibition.

Attie's "Untitled Memory (Projection of Armand V.J.)" was created in San Francisco.



Shimon Attie brings haunting images to ICA

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

The glowing color photographs of a cafe, a theater, a Torah reading room, and other sites from Berlin's Scheunenviertel, the city's former Jewish quarter, were taken in the 1990s. The blurry black-and-white photographs of the quarter's residents date from 1920 to 1933, just before the advent of the darkness that changed the city — and the world — forever. The two sets of pictures, the old superimposed on the new, marry uneasily, as they're supposed to. They remind you that European Jewry was nearly

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wiped out, while some of the buildings those Jews once occupied still stand. The Jewish neighborhoods that weren't destroyed were sadly neglected, though: These Berlin buildings are crumbling and litter-ridden.

Ensnared in light boxes in a darkened gallery, the photographs are documentation of Shimon Attie's 1992 project, "The Writing on the Wall." For a couple of nights, Attie projected images of former ghetto residents onto the remains of the actual buildings where they lived and worked. He came as close as possible to recreating a lost world. The inhabitants of the Scheunenviertel in the former East Berlin disappeared long ago; the buildings are disappearing today, with the gentrification that has come

with reunification.

The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston has organized and is now showing the first survey of Attie's photographic and public work. The exhibition's curator is Ellen Fleurov, director of the California Center for the Arts in Escondido. Much of what's inside the ICA is a photographic record of Attie's outdoor pieces, but for Boston he's creating "An Unusually Bad Lot," to be projected on the institute's facade, starting next Thursday night.

Memory conveyed through photographs of those who died is a frequent tool in the Holocaust-related work of artists including Christian Boltanski; memory was also the subject of the recent Boston University exhibition of photographs of Polish Jews, "And I Still See Their Faces." Both Boltanski's work and the BU show are more straightforward than Attie's art, which jumps back and forth in time.

In one riveting photograph from the Berlin project, a gloomy tower, the kind that might stand guard over a prison or political border, juts up amid a scarred setting of barbed wire, scaffolding, and ornately framed windows covered in tattered plastic. Huddled in a doorway are two children who appear to be waiting — but not for the fate they probably met. The photographs of these projections are haunting, although they also made me yearn to have witnessed in Berlin the full-scale work, which must have been both chilling and majestic.

Attie's projections necessarily happen at night, and the documentary photographs of them demonstrate a great sensitivity to twilight-into-evening effects. In the photographs, which are also artworks in themselves, neither streets nor subjects are set far back in the picture: You're in intimate contact with these eerily lit spaces and their denizens. One Berlin picture features a gleaming pink sky that harmonizes tenderly with the projection of a rosy Star of David hovering over the bowed head of a man in a window. Another photograph is suffused with a golden light reminiscent both of cinematic effects and, oddly enough, given the subject, of the magical illumination of Nativity scenes.

Among the other European cities where Attie has created projects are Copenhagen and Amsterdam. Denmark sent its Jews to Sweden during the war; the country remains justifiably proud of that successful clandestine operation. But Denmark is ambivalent about contemporary exiles from the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia who are seeking sanctuary there. This divide, this unease over who belongs where and why, is the subject of Attie's site-specific 1995 installation "Portraits of Exiles, Copenhagen, Denmark," which consisted of nine large light boxes submerged under the waters of Copenhagen's Borsgraven Canal. In the boxes were backlit images of Jews who were rescued by being smuggled aboard fishing boats bound for Sweden, juxtaposed with images of present-day refugees liv-

ing on dormitory ships used as "temporary" shelter. The floating faces have an air of transience and expectation; they're en route somewhere. One photo suggests a happy ending: the face of a current refugee whose passport bears a Danish entry stamp.

The Copenhagen project, in the young tradition of installations exploiting emotionally charged, historically significant places from Bunke Hill to Robben Island, is represented at the ICA by a video installation and large-scale photographs. The photos are breathtakingly beautiful but only the video conveys the all-important motion of the water.

"The Neighbor Next Door, Amsterdam," inevitably calls Anne Frank to mind. Some of the Jews who hid on the Prinsengracht in that city secretly filmed the life they glimpsed through barely parted curtains. Attie projected that archival footage from the upper floors of buildings on the same street, onto the pavement below. Phalanxes of Nazis and a funeral entourage were among the images, which were shown without sound or labeling or any explanation, and must have puzzled Amsterdamers who came upon them unknowingly, who even drove their cars over them. In the ICA installation, you view the films through tiny peepholes in the wall, feeling very much in hiding yourself, momentarily experiencing the claustrophobia some Dutch Jews endured for years.

The Los Angeles-born Attie was raised as a secular Jew. In the final short film about him and his work, being shown in the ICA basement during the run of his exhibition, he talks about matters such as how happy kosher pickles make him. Before taking up photography and launching his series of ambitious projects, he studied psychology. That background is evident in scenes of him working with Jewish and Asian residents of New York's Lower East Side. He's a natural at the kind of collaborative, community-based art that has, at the end of the 20th century, become an accepted alternative to the artist as individual creator — with Tim Rollins + K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) the most famous example.

As the film at the ICA demonstrates, Attie is adept at coaxing elderly people and recent immigrants, people who might naturally be timid into sharing their thoughts with him. For his "Between Dreams and History" project in New York, he got them to write down their favorite songs, stories, even superstitions, and used their actual handwriting in laser projections on tenements, shops, and a synagogue. Not everything they contributed was upbeat. "This is not the place I dreamt of before I came," wrote one recent arrival. What the still photos at the ICA can't show, but the film does, is that the laser texts appeared on the buildings as if written on the spot. Then, as if made with invisible ink, they went away, as history does if it's not closely guarded. In the photographs of "Between Dreams and History," the grubby tenements are shot from below, under night skies. They have a Hopperesque loneliness, very different from the bustle that surely exists in this neighborhood during the day.

The Attie show closes with the most personal and least powerful works: 20 years' worth of snapshots of the artist's family and friends, taken in his San Francisco home, projected back onto the original sites as they are today, and treated to delicately surreal color and lighting effects. The strategy is similar to the one in the Berlin project, but the almost operatic tragedy is missing. The results are far gentler. The apparitionlike characters carry their own pools of radiance around them. The lighting, and the apparent ordinariness of these people, their activities, and settings, suggest the everyday yet heightened reality of 17th-century Dutch painting.

There's a smaller show at the ICA as well, a two-part wall drawing by Ambreen Butt, the Pakistani-born, Massachusetts College of Art-educated winner of the first ICA Artist Prize. The award of \$2,500 also comes with a chance to exhibit at the institute. Butt's drawing, feminist in both messages and images, combines the quivering pencil lines of Agnes Martin with the vaginal imagery of Georgia O'Keeffe, plus text that reinforces the idea of women as heroic survivors.

► Attie's new public art piece, "An Unusually Bad Lot," will be projected on the ICA facade starting at 5 each evening from Thursday to Jan. 12.

SITES UNSEEN: SHIMON ATTIE — PHOTOGRAPHS AND PUBLIC PROJECTS, 1992-98
At: the Institute of Contemporary Art, through Jan. 16
AMBREEN BUTT: ARTIST PRIZE EXHIBITION
At: the ICA, through Jan. 16



From "Between Dreams and History," Attie's project in New York.

The Memory Wall



Metaphysical archaeologist Shimon Attie: "I have a recurring dream that I'm in the past."

BY C. CARR

His is the art of hidden histories, the excavation of pasts too deep for the shovel to reach. Call it metaphysical archaeology.

In his very first piece in 1991, Shimon Attie projected archival photographs of prewar Jewish life onto the same or similar Berlin walls where they were originally taken, then reshot the scenes. So once more a man stood looking into the window of a Hebrew bookstore in what used to be Berlin's Jewish quarter. Attie's photos were made to record not a memory but an absence.

Now, in "Between Dreams and History," a new piece visible Wednesday through Saturday nights through November 14 at Ludlow and Rivington streets, a ghost appears to be writing on the tenement walls. The beautiful blue handwriting is actually laser light, controlled by techies on rooftops

with computers, scanners, DAT tape, and mirrors. But the text—dreams, wishes, poems, and prayers—reads like a message in five languages from the collective unconscious of the Lower East Side. *I have a recurring dream that I'm in the past, and see things in my neighborhood that may actually have happened. I walk from block to block as scenes from the past reveal themselves. . . .*

AN AMERICAN ARTIST who made his reputation in Europe, Attie hails from that most ahistorical of cities, Los Angeles. At 17, however, he moved to San Francisco to become a psychologist. That profession doesn't figure in his work, Attie insists. At least not consciously. Even if both have a little something to do with recovering the past. Attie followed a circuitous route into the art world and the psych degree was just part of it, a compromise he made back when he decided that he was "too scared" to be an artist.

He didn't think he could make a living that way, but art was what he'd

always wanted to do. At 24, he took his first art class, unsure of himself, wondering "dare I take another?" gradually building confidence over four or five years. When he finally entered an MFA program, he supported himself with his psychology practice. Then he really took a leap into the void. He moved to Berlin in 1991 at age 34, with a few thousand dollars and no job.

"That dark morbid intensity of Berlin, plus the very palpable sense of history—both totally absent in California—really pulled me." He had spent the previous summer in Berlin, slide-projecting medical illustrations of assorted viscera onto war-damaged buildings and photographing them. "Back in San Francisco, a couple of people challenged me. 'Why is it that you really want to go back to Berlin?' And I realized, why pull punches? In fact, the core of it for me did relate to the Second World War."

Specifically, to the Holocaust, which he describes as a "very very

big deal" in his family. Many of his parents' friends were survivors, and his father began telling him stories about it when he was very young. By the time he was 10, Attie was going to the library to look for books on the Holocaust.

During the five and a half years he lived in Berlin, Attie created public art projects all over Europe related to the Shoah. Yet he doesn't want to be thought of as a "Holocaust artist." He explains: "I came to these cities and cultures not as an objective observer but as an artist profoundly influenced by the stories about the war. . . . I learned through these stories, particularly those told by my father, that part of being Jewish meant I was connected to a life and culture that no longer existed. This feeling of having lost something I have never had, akin to what one might have for a grandparent who passed away before one's birth, was a powerful thread running through my childhood and has deeply influenced my work."

WHEN CREATIVE TIME invited Attie to New York to do his first public art project in America, he felt uninspired at first. He remembers telling Creative Time's executive director, Anne Pasternak, "I hope you're not going to hate me forever, but I'm not feeling moved to do anything."

Then, one day, he wandered by accident into the Educational Alliance Building on East Broadway. "There were all these older Yids, 70 or 80 years old," Attie recalls. "They were telling me to tuck my shirt in, cut my nails better, that kind of stuff. They were like my family. I felt immediately at home. So that's where I got my first juice." His own grandparents were Syrian Jews, who'd lived briefly on the Lower East Side before moving to Flatbush.

But Attie knew that he didn't want to focus solely on the Jewish community here. "It's different to do it in a context like Germany, where an entire race of people was obliterated," he says. But it didn't make sense when change came to the neighborhood because of upward mobility or assimilation.

"Between Dreams and History" became a study in the folklore of immigration. Attie met with Puerto Rican, Dominican, Chinese, and Jewish residents, asking for childhood songs and riddles, a nighttime prayer, superstitions and premonitions, three wishes, and memories of contact with other cultures. He hadn't begun that way, but his first, more straightforward

questions about their memories had elicited answers that were concrete, depressing, and without any poetry.

The finished piece looks deceptively simple, but Attie conceived of it two years ago and has been working on it full-time since last November. He spent months just scouting sites, researching each block in the nabe. Then there was the basic problem of getting the writing onto the walls. Creative Time brought in Norman Ballard, the tech wizard behind the Disney musical *Beauty and the Beast*, to design a system. As Pasternak put it, "Lasers have never done what they're doing here."

ONE MORNING AT THE Educational Alliance last May, members of the Yiddish class came a little early to meet with Attie. A woman named Charlotte had pictures from another world—the Houston Street of the '40s and her mother's dry goods store—long since erased by a housing development. "It's a time impressed on my mind 100 percent," she told Attie.

"Have any of you ever had a dream about this neighborhood?" he asked.

A man named Allen said he dreamt of it often, as it was in the '30s. "I'm seeing things that are no longer there, stores we don't have anymore, things that didn't happen but might have happened. I like what I see. I think, can this continue? I've transcended into the past."

"That's a jewel," said Attie. "That's what the project is about." He asked Allen to write it down and it became the "recurring dream" text above.

What's interesting about the text now lighting the walls at Ludlow and Rivington is how culturally nonspecific it is, given that Attie spent last spring collecting it from very specific cultural groups: a choir of Latino seniors, a tai chi class of Chinese seniors, the Yiddish class of Jewish seniors, along with various youth groups. He was astonished at the synchronicity he found in all this material, "one person's poem relating to another one's sleeping dream relating to another's Yiddish folk song to a Chinese person's superstition to a Puerto Rican children's song."

Interviews with 75 people have been boiled down into 28 short texts that appear to inscribe themselves on the tenement walls, then vanish as if written in so much disappearing ink. *He dreams, is he alive or just a visitor in his body? Am I still living one more night? The kingdom has no end. There are easy times, there are hard times. The water keeps on running, but the flowers die.* □

An exhibition of Shimon Attie's work runs concurrently at the Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street.