

About the Artist

Drawing upon multiple disciplines including photography, new media, and public art, Shimon Attie creates enveloping installations that investigate the relationship between personal memory and collective histories. In doing so, Attie's work invites viewers to experience and negotiate the complexity of the past. Speaking about his own work, Attie states, "I am most interested in the relationship between place, memory, and identity and how this relationship might be distilled and articulated through visual and aesthetic means."

Attie received his MFA from San Francisco State University in 1991 and has exhibited widely, both nationally and internationally. Attie's site-specific projects focus on the lost histories of marginalized and forgotten communities. For *The Writing on the Wall*, the artist projected prewar photographs of street life in Berlin's Jewish quarter onto the same or nearby addresses. In *Between Dreams and History*, created in New York's Lower East Side, Attie created sophisticated laser projections on tenement buildings to illuminate the immigrant experience. More recently, in his five-channel video installation *The Attraction of Onlookers*, Attie created an artwork with the participation of citizens of Aberfan, a Welsh village that became "famous" 40 years ago when it lost nearly all its children in a manmade disaster.

Attie's honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship (2008), a Fellowship from Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute (2006), and the Rome Prize (2002). Four monographs on the artist's work have been published, and his work is in the collection of many institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Shimon Attie: *Sightings* *The Ecology of an Art Museum*

October 25–February 8, 2008

Shimon Attie's multichannel video works continue his interest in communities and how notions of memory, place, and identity shape the affiliations that define them. In earlier works he deployed the power of photography to recover the memories of places that had been lost through time. Throughout the 1990s, in Berlin, Rome, and Manhattan, he projected historical, vintage photographs onto the exteriors of public buildings in order to recover the historical record of those places, especially their social uses and the conditions of the people whose lives there were no longer evident.

Layering

Attie's use of complex layering elements generates tableaux that are multivalent and open to the play of diverse voices. His earlier works were created during the height of an era defined by identity politics, which is characterized by self-expression based on affiliations and group consciousness rather than the pre-established definitions of identity and difference imposed by governing ideologies. Although Attie's work is often described as "humanist" because of his concern with the social and political situations of individuals, such a characterization is misleading and reductive. Attie's works extend beyond the collective histories revealed by issues of race, gender, and class, emphasizing the shared psychological experiences that shape behavior.

There has always been an uncanny sensibility in Shimon Attie's photo-based and video artworks. The word "uncanny" derives from the German *unheimlich*, which refers to the unknown that is strangely familiar, and therefore known in some way after all. In Freudian theory, this paradox—of something one understands without an awareness of its origin or how one apprehends it—lies at the heart of memory, the bringing of something to mind through recall. According to Freud, a sense of the uncanny results when that which is being recalled is unavailable due to repression.



Illustrations: Selected stills from the Video *Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum*, Shimon Attie, 2008. courtesy of the artist.

Attie's research and recovery of the visual record of a place offers an analogue to the return of the repressed—the psychoanalytic notion that conscious thought processes are repeatedly interrupted by earlier desires that have been restrained through training and social conditioning. He reproduces this mechanism of the unconscious in the public arena through his collage of historical images. This layering of time and space through constructed tableaux reveals how one's experience can be inflected by something familiar that lies outside of consciousness. Through his visual interventions, Attie brings to light that which has become hidden or rendered secret and loads the present with uncanny resonances.

Staging

Attie's video projects extend the resonances of his layered imagery through the dramatic presentation of living subjects. His extensive investigations into the Welsh village of Aberfan, New York's Bridgehampton auto racetrack, and now the de Young Museum share a similar rhetorical strategy in spite of their widely differing subjects. In them Attie translates the elements of his earlier photographic projections into the language of cinematic narrative and spectacle.

The competing claims of narrative and spectacle can be explained by contrasting Attie's work with the photographs of Thomas Struth, who also explores the relationship between people and museums. Struth focuses on the space of exhibition by presenting



groups of tourists in front of pictures, often with their backs to the camera. The viewers in his photographs are shown participating in the social terrain of museum display, which emphasizes the presentation of iconic art objects as masterworks. The depicted spectators are rendered as ciphers, with little room for any response except an implied reverence. These photographs enact the visual rhetoric of spectacle, which reduces the role of the viewers in the image to that of spectators, who are passive, rather than agents, who are active. The possibility of engagement is foreclosed because there is no way when looking at it to imagine how one might participate in creating new narrative possibilities for the scene. Like his depicted viewers, spectators in front of Struth's photographs are thus reduced to the role of passive observers.

By contrast, Attie focuses on the exchange between viewers and art objects, isolating them in a decontextualized, black void (which Emily K. Doman Jennings explains in her accompanying essay). At first blush the theatrical elements of his darkened room, three video screens, and oscillating stage might seem to replicate the conditions of spectacle, closing off the video spectator's agency and leaving little imaginative access into the filmed tableaux of viewer and object. However, Attie's staging of this encounter calls into question the very roles of subject and object that usually define museum display. He reverses the rhetorical strategies of spectacle, which often function to numb the spectator, turning viewers simply into passive observers of an event or performance.



Oscillating

Attie's decision to film viewers interacting with artworks from the de Young's global survey collection recognizes the range of objects on display in the museum. However, in place of the customary organization by region and period that a visitor would encounter in the galleries, Attie has evoked the special affinities that individuals develop with specific objects. Through a revolving point of view, he draws attention equally to the viewers, the objects, and the space of exchange they share as it expands and collapses on the screen.

Additionally, by distributing his images around a darkened room on three separate channels, he incorporates the video's spectator into the narrative of his filmed tableaux, adding a fourth layer to the three screened images. The result is a complex set of oscillating structures, both literal and figurative, which creates shifting layers of association. These associations change with different spectators of the video as their own experiences with the art objects are felt in context with the reactions of the multiple actors on the screen.

As spaces of display, museums decontextualize objects, creating surprising juxtapositions as visitors move from one gallery to the next. Attie's project heightens that experience as his various tableaux overlap single objects, such as in the transitions from an Asmat warrior shield to a Victorian afternoon dress, from a Teotihuacan ballplayer figure to a post-World War II Bay Area figure painting. The cultures represented by these objects oscillate even as their impressions linger through Attie's careful sequences and layering.

Moreover, the "sightings" referred to in the work's title include those uncanny perceptions that hover just out of view. The literal oscillations of Attie's video installation rhyme the sense of something puzzling or even mysterious and yet familiar that viewers experience when they are drawn to particular art objects. His project unhinges its spectators from their comfortable experiences in museums where they can rely on organized displays and explanatory texts. Instead, he creates a continuous cycle of exchanges, a series of ineffable experiences punctuated by moments of insight. Attie's video provides glimpses of the knowledge that artworks can elucidate when they lead spectators into those unexpected associations from the unconscious that the uncanny makes available.

Daniell Cornell, Curator of the Exhibition
Deputy Director for Art and Senior Curator, Palm Springs Art Museum



The Collection Connections program presents new works that aim to reinterpret traditional objects from the permanent collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The contemporary artists working in this space create installations that transform the conventional experience of museum visitors. For each project, artist and curator draw inspiration from the permanent collection, offering nontraditional connections that provide visual and educational opportunities to explain, interpret, and recontextualize the art objects on display throughout the museum. Through these projects, visitors are given a window into the ways that artists and cultural institutions construct and disseminate knowledge about historical understanding and current attitudes.

Collection Connections is generously funded by the Annenberg Foundation. The series is part of the de Young's Cultural Encounters initiative designed to attract new and diverse audiences. Cultural Encounters is supported by The James Irvine Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Columbia Foundation, and the Winifred Johnson Clive Foundation.

Time and Light in the Art of Shimon Attie

The production of Shimon Attie's *Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum* interwove almost every aspect of the art museum, ranging from visitorship to conservation, public relations to security, and exhibition design to education. Those who engaged with the project found themselves working in new and innovative ways that challenged the set means of operation. Art museums, housing collections of objects removed from their original sites, are inherently locations of disrupted narratives, unexpected juxtapositions, and decontextualized histories. Typically, encyclopedic museum collections work against this historical void to create new contextual environments for each collection, providing viewers with an interpretive platform. Attie, by isolating viewer and object within the confines of a "black box," takes sight, as implied by the exhibition's title, as his primary theme. Within this broad framework, Attie, through the use of light and staging, focuses the observer's attention on the fragmentation of the art object's historical context through its contemporary life and resonances.

Attie describes the quality of light within his video work as "Vermeeresque," referring to the characteristic light in the work of Dutch 17th-century painter Jan Vermeer. To achieve this aesthetic requires the expert handling of numerous high-voltage studio lamps and an intense eye for detail that recognizes which areas to highlight, conceal, or reveal. The overall effect creates a tableau of seductive surfaces that transfix the viewer. This quality of prolonged visual investigation harkens directly to Vermeer's working process of sustained and unwavering observation aided by the use of lenses, mirrors, and the camera obscura. Through the use of such visual aids, Vermeer depicted his surrounding environment with a quality of scientific specificity. Yet the artist's use of light also invoked an animative quality. Capturing the complexity of vital flesh tones and the ephemeral glistening of light off a windowpane, luminosity within Vermeer's work stimulates the eye, making the viewer of his paintings experience the physicality of observation. Drawing upon these qualities of Vermeer's aesthetic, Attie complicates the observational experience by lighting both the artwork and the viewer equally within the video.

The use of a rotating plinth and split-screen editing further complicate the relationship between viewer and artwork within the video. As the viewer and the artwork rotate through the visual field, their relationship oscillates, each alternately becoming subject and object. By extension, the rotation of the frame implicates the observer within the work. Visual identification shifts from looking over the viewer's shoulder at the artwork, to looking at the viewer as object, to voyeuristically investigating both art object and viewer(s). The rotation of the plinth and the use of split-screen editing also collapses and expands the



On the set of *Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum*, 2008.

Photographs: Joseph McDonald



Selected stills from the Video *Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum*, Shimon Attie, 2008.

perceptible distance between viewer and object. This collapse and expansion of visual space creates a hyper-real environment that visualizes the temporal rupture between the object and viewer, which functions as a metaphorical representation of the shifts between knowledge and meaning. At one end of the spectrum stands the viewer characterized by lived experiences and memories that inform the way he/she navigates and interprets his/her surroundings. On the other end lies the object that is rooted by the historical provenance and academic discourse of the institutional archive. By working within a rotational frame, Attie allows the interpretive pendulum to swing from one end of the spectrum to the next.

Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum offers museum observers the rare opportunity to focus upon the root experience of an art museum: sight. Through the use of the "black box," Attie clearly signals his interest in the reciprocal relationship between viewer and art object, freeing the museum observer from interpretive traditions that create "authority" in an art museum. In doing so, the work becomes as much about the self as about the observational process.

Emily K. Doman Jennings
Museum Educator, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Collection Connections

Shimon Attie Sightings, The Ecology of an Art Museum

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