Art in America

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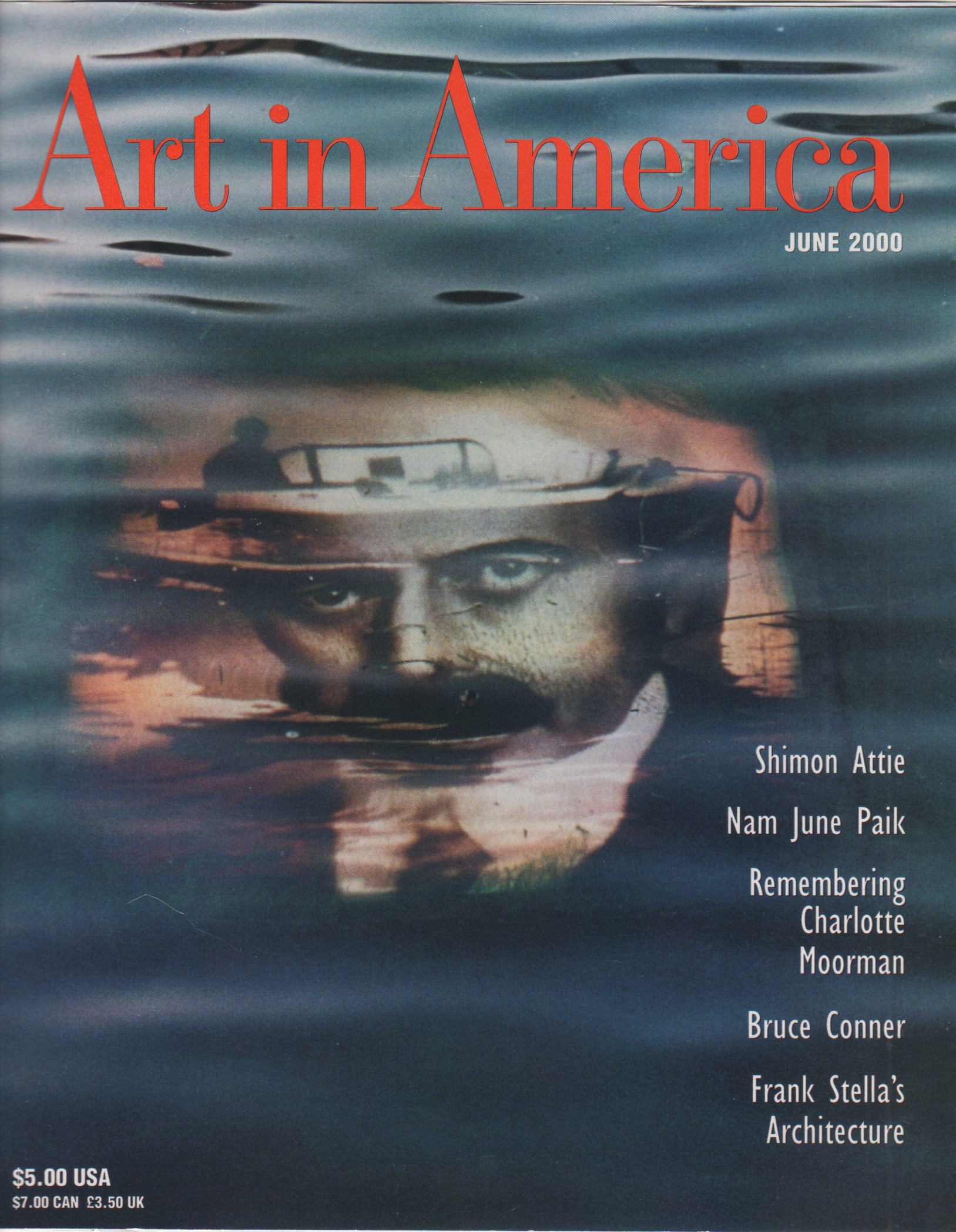


Shimon Attie

Nam June Paik

Remembering Charlotte Moorman

Bruce Conner

Frank Stella's Architecture

$5.00 USA
$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

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.

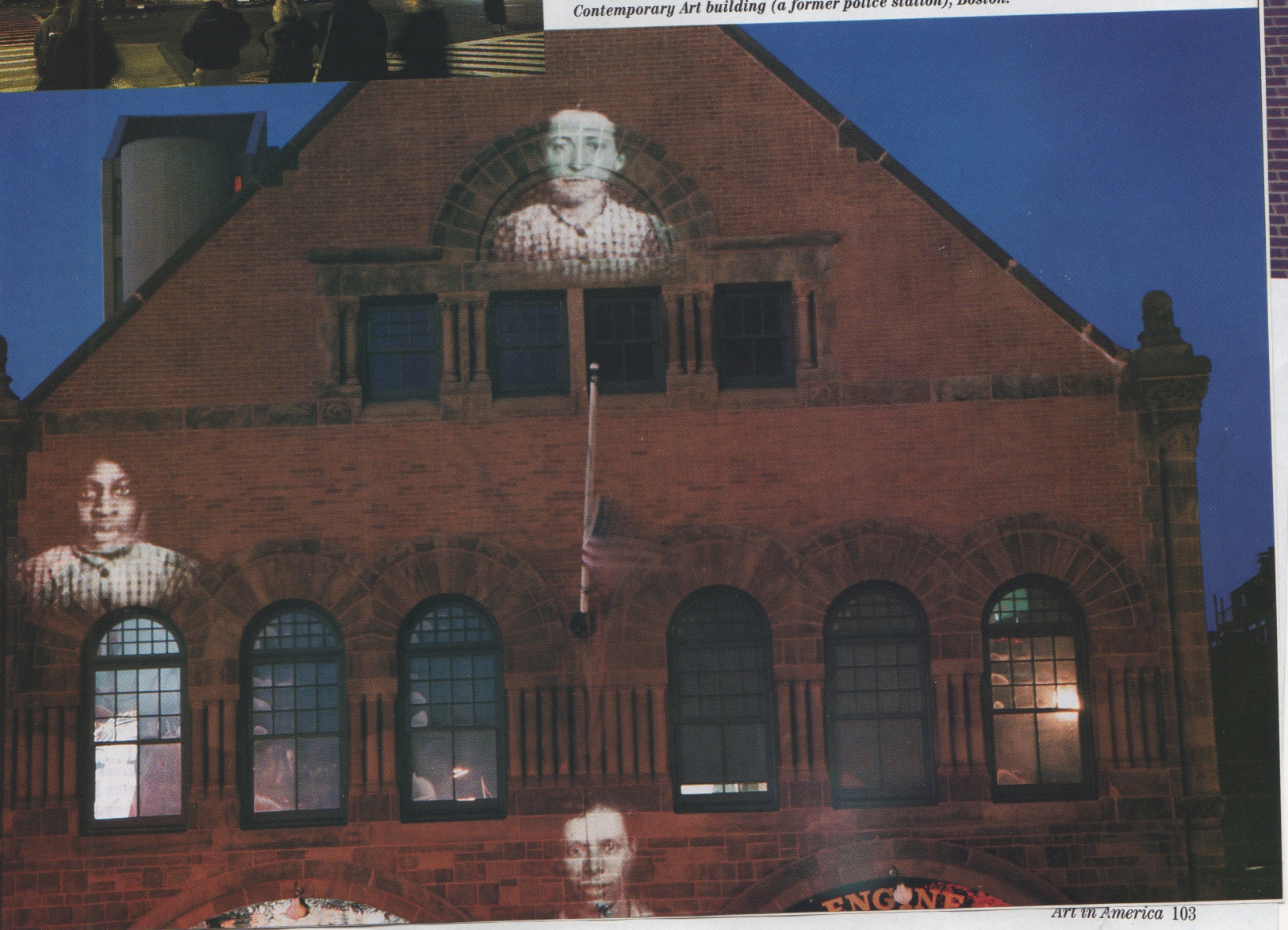
"The Writing on the Wall" concentrated on images of Jewish life in Berlin's Scheuenenviertel, the old neighborhood where the city's immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe had lived from the late 19th century until World War II. In his essay in the book accompanying the exhibition, James E. Young, author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

site work—we are propelled into a dream state. Conjuring mem-
d history, the work evokes tragedy.
se very theatrical tableaux also suggest the brooding atmosphere of
ood film noir. One of the best-known images from this series—and
ps the most formally sophisticated and politically loaded—is a view of
erlin apartments in which we see, projected onto a bricked-over win-
a Star of David that appears above the head of a praying man.
rtant here is the way Attie uses the low angle to dramatize the crosslike
arance of the transoms and mullions in the windows of the looming
by buildings. Thus he signals the age-old conflict between socially domi-
Christianity and a Jewish microcosm, while playing off a fleeting
ection 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 Re and as a warehouse and auction site for their seized property. The focu the material goods of a bygone era, via images projected onto the brick lars surrounding the entryway to the hall that hosts the art fair, suggeste troubling connection with the sale of the art works inside. In showing modest domestic objects that became Nazi confiscated goods (many which still circulate as antiques in Germany today), and in showing as w the period ads that publicized the auctions through which the Nazis so these goods, Attie presciently reflected the controversies that were ju 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 face that he chose to highlight. Here he opted to present not only the visages o Jews rescued by the Danes during the Holocaust but also those of politica 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 31½ inches square; installed near a site used for the filming of Schindler's List, *Szeroka Street, Kraków.*

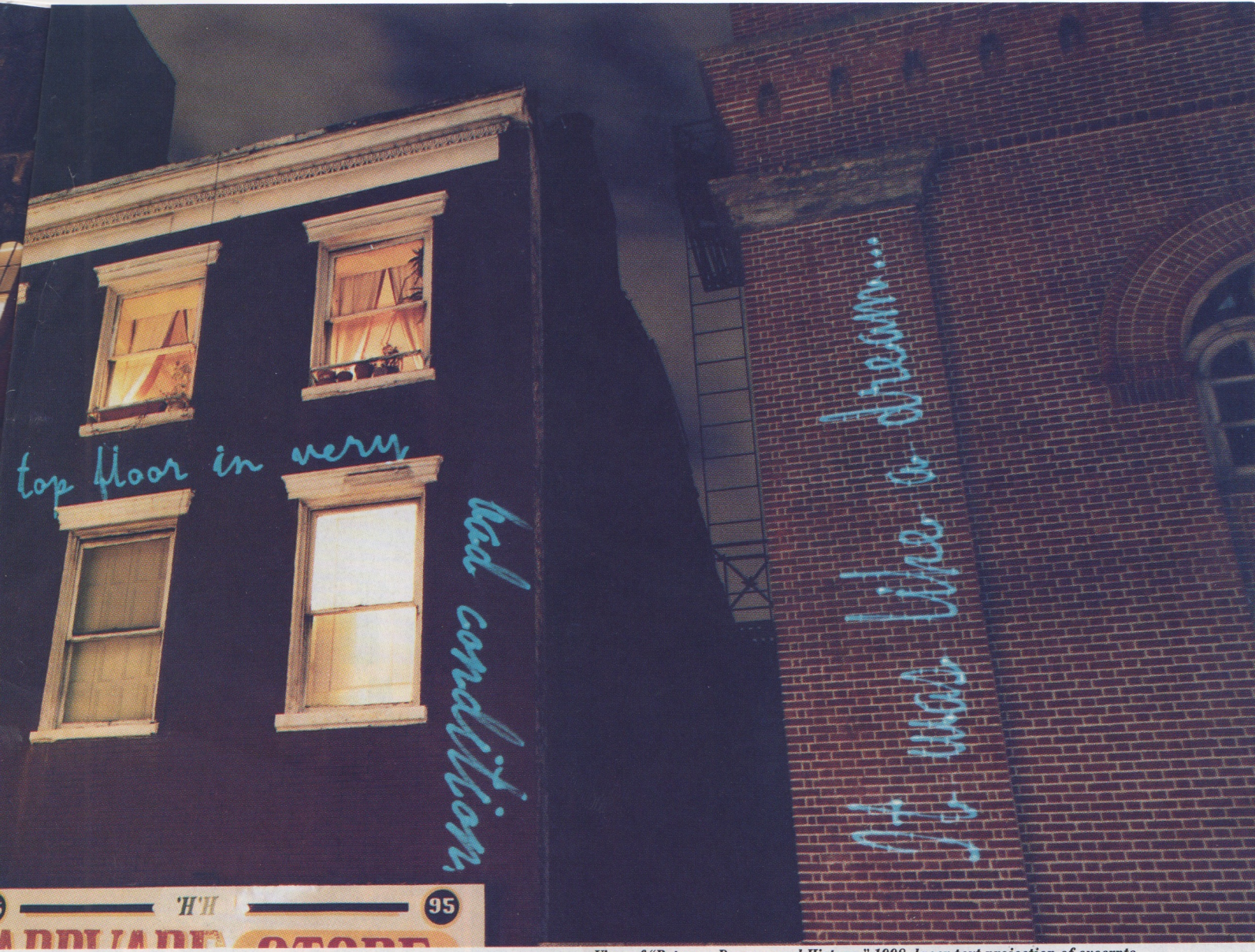
Opposite, two images from "Untitled Memory," 1998, Ektachrome photographs recording life-size slide projections of friends Thomas P. (top) and Armand V. (bottom), in the artist's former San Francisco apartment, 40 by 47 inches each.

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, Atral, 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.

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