

Attie



Shimon Attie: MetroPAL.IS.

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Shimon Attie's *MetroPAL.IS.* is an eight-channel immersive HD video installation that features members of the Israeli and Palestinian communities of New York City. Attie's intention is for the artwork, created with the assistance of his longtime production associate, Vale Bruck, to re-imagine and re-configure the seemingly intractable Middle East conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, in part by engaging their shared secondary hybrid identity—that of being New Yorkers.

Over the course of his twenty-year-long career, Attie has consistently worked with the subjects of cultural displacement and the way identity is mediated by place. Born in Los Angeles, spending some of his teenage years in Israel, and living and working in both Berlin and Rome (the artist has lived in New York City since 1997) gave Attie a unique cultural perspective and a deep interest in how history—and cultural memory—has shaped the modern world. First known in the 1990s for a series of projects that dealt with the Holocaust and the Jewish Diaspora, Attie created subsequent work that explored subjects as diverse as immigration on New York's Lower East Side, the legacy of a mining disaster in a small Welsh coal mining village, the closing of an auto racing track on Long Island, and the relationship between the objects in a museum's art collection and the public. As his practice as an artist expanded, however, Attie knew there would inevitably come a time when he would engage with an issue that affected him deeply: the ongoing conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.



Attie understood from the beginning that approaching the issue directly was a problematic exercise. The major points of the history of the conflict were well-known, disproving the old maxim that those who don't remember history are doomed to repeat it: every several years a new peace initiative was initiated, and peace talks were revived only to fall apart, while the situation only grew worse and more complicated. And, of course, Attie knew that any project on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict ran the risk of becoming attached to both the politics and rhetoric of the so-called "global war on terror." As noted Palestinian-American author and cultural critic Edward Said wrote, "Anyone who has seriously tried to examine the contemporary Near East is frequently tempted to conclude that the project is an unmanageable one."¹

Further complicating the equation was the sense that a work of art on the conflict would be in danger of falling into one of two simplistic and stereotypical points of view: either the bleak and hopeless one that emphasizes the cycle of violence and retribution, or a "kumbaya" tale of unity and reconciliation. Attie knew that the language of contemporary art and the medium of video installation intrinsically provided a platform where intricacy, ambiguity, drama, and poetry could help to mitigate the pitfalls of any project dealing with such a difficult and complex issue.

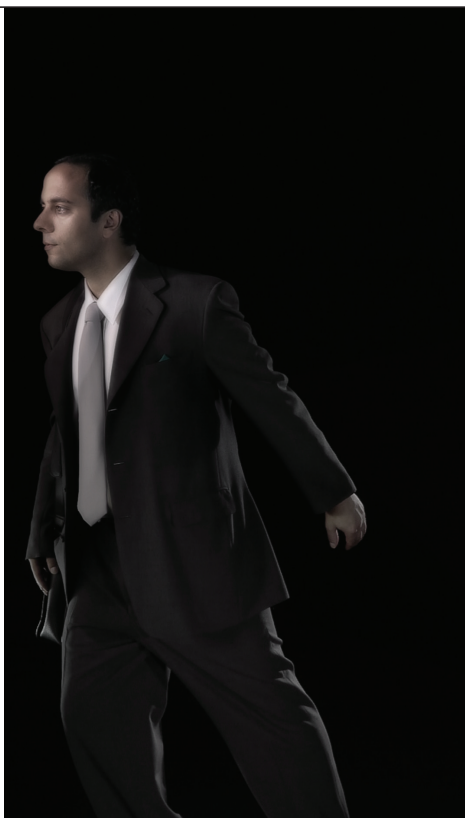
Approaching the subject from an oblique angle, Attie chose the Israeli and Palestinian communities of New York City as protagonists for his project. New York has a huge population of Israeli immigrants, and a sizable population of immigrant Palestinians, and Attie realized that the triangulation of their hybrid identity (Palestine-New York-Israel) would be a creative device that could help to thaw out the frozen narrative of Middle Eastern politics. Working with his production managers, kNow Productions, Attie recruited twenty-nine members² of both communities through a process reminiscent of a theatrical casting call. The goal was to find a variety of Israeli and Palestinian émigrés, both male and female, who had some acting experience—particularly the ability to read and perform from a complex written text. There are twelve New York/Middle Eastern characters in *MetroPAL.IS.*, each conceived as a pair: an Israeli falafel cook/a Palestinian falafel cook; an Israeli businessman/a Palestinian businessman; a pregnant Israeli woman/a pregnant Palestinian woman; an Israeli "urban hipster"/a Palestinian "urban hipster"; an Israeli "Jersey Girl"/a Palestinian "Jersey Girl"; a Palestinian religious woman/an Israeli Orthodox woman; etc. As the range of characters attests, *MetroPAL.IS.* is as much about what it means to be a New Yorker as it is to be either Palestinian or Israeli, a position that interjected another layer of dramatic narrative that would move the work from merely being a dialectic on the Middle East towards a more imaginative and open-ended interpretation of both the subject and the nature of hybrid identity.³ Accentuating the triangulation of the narrative, Attie had each participant

reinforce their identity through the emphasis of their specific accent: Hebrew, Arabic, or vernacular New York regional.

As the concept of the work developed, the most crucial and difficult decision hinged on the nature of the dialogue that the twenty-four characters would be performing. Attie wanted a script that had both unifying and discordant elements that would act to inexorably interlink the two groups. The artist had long been interested in the formal declarations of independence of the two peoples, particularly from the standpoint that if a few key signifiers were removed from each document, they mirrored each other in both tone and content. Working with the texts of the Israeli Declaration (1948) and the Palestinian Declaration (1988, also known as the “Algiers Declaration”⁴) Attie crafted a hybrid text containing content from both documents. Although there are great similarities in the two declarations, Attie decided that Israeli participants would only speak words from the Israeli declaration, and Palestinian participants would only speak words from the Palestinian declaration, with both groups speaking words and phrases common to both. This not only reinforced each group’s identity, but also set the stage for confrontation and introduced the potential of reconciliation.

Attie conceived of the piece in musical terms, with the relationship of individual voices being thought of as a “score,” divided into four chapters that each exhibit a rise and fall of both dramatic content and formal relationships. The score was written so it could scroll, teleprompter-like, across the screen of a monitor in front of the actors, with a moving cue that would keep each character reading in an exact timeline. As an additional aid for pacing, each actor listened on an invisible earpiece to a master recording of the score that was in sync with

MetroPALIS. (video stills), 2010



the written score. As each actor was filmed individually in the studio, these timing features were critical, as it provided a way for Attie to synchronize the individual performances to form a continuous whole. The synchronization was further controlled in post-production, where not only the volume of individual voices could be regulated, but also their timing: a voice could be either speeded up or slowed down to bring it slightly in or out of sync, a technique that created a texture that was more human than mechanical. *MetroPAL.IS.* is the most complex work incorporating sound ever attempted by the artist, and the manipulation made possible by current digital technology was a crucial part of the work’s production. This is a section of the score, with Israeli voices in blue, and Palestinian voices in green:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|------|--------------|-----|-------|----|-----|--------|----|-------|--------|----|----|---------|---|
| | | | | right | of | the | people | of | Their | Rights | To | | | |
| | | | | | of | the | people | of | Their | Rights | To | be | | |
| | | | | | | the | people | of | Their | Rights | To | be | masters | |
| | | | | | | | people | of | Their | Rights | To | be | masters | of their fate, in their own, sovereign State. |
| Whereas the people reaffirm, | most | definitively | The | right | of | the | people | | | | | | | |
| | most | definitively | The | right | of | the | people | of | | | | | | |
| | | definitively | The | right | of | the | people | of | Their | | | | | |
| | | | The | right | of | the | people | of | Their | Rights | | | | |

From the beginning, the artist knew that *MetroPAL.IS.* would take the form of a freestanding circle of screens. With the work’s individual protagonists facing inward, they would be directly addressing not only each other, but also the group as a whole. Furthering the theatricality inherent in the work, viewers standing inside the circle are not only an audience to the performance, but quasi participants, caught in the middle of the exclamations and emotions expressed by both groups. Viewers inside the circle are intimately implicated in the situation, while those standing outside are cast in the role of being mere observers, a situation that echoes the often-schizophrenic engagement/disengagement that the world has with the Israeli/Palestinian issue.



For Attie, the circular form of *MetroPAL.IS.* also has a deep historical connection. Much of the artist’s work is informed by an interest in the Classical world; not just its cultural legacy, but also its political and social underpinnings.⁵ The basis for Western democracy lies in the Greek and Roman notions of republican discourse: government in which the supreme power rests in the body of citizens entitled to vote, expressed by representatives chosen by them. Spatially this was manifest during the Roman Empire by the Forum, a public space in the middle of the Roman city that was the focus of political discussion and debate. It was in the Roman Senate that the tradition of *locus popularis* begun, where for the first time rulers turned and spoke directly to the common people.

In having “common” Israelis and Palestinians recite beliefs and aspirations expressed in formal political declarations, Attie is subtly reversing *locus popularis*: the content of the declarations in *MetroPAL.IS.* are transformed from nationalist to deeply (and tragically) humanist.

Attie reinforced the work’s connection to Classicism by having the participants assume static, statue-like poses that look away from the camera when they are not speaking. During these interludes, the individuals are portrayed with a soft “waxy” surface treatment in muted monochrome color, and as they begin to speak they transition to full color. This duality creates a complex visual rhythm that reflects the tension between idealism and the reality of the relationship between the two communities. As in Classical sculpture, the characters in *MetroPAL.IS.* become archetypal figures when frozen, displaced slightly outside of linear time and by extension the current conflict. The Holy Land has been the site of almost continuous invasion and dislocation from the beginning of recorded history, and the juxtaposition of the eternal and the contemporary reflect on this history with visual metaphor rather than a literal accounting. It is worth noting that Attie first studied psychology before he turned to art, and the oscillation between rigidity and suppleness that is exhibited by the characters in *MetroPAL.IS.* is reminiscent of classic psychoanalytic belief on the nature of the process of psychological growth and change. Attie seems to be implying that the Middle East is stuck in a cycle that can only be disrupted by a radical re-imagining of the narrative, freeing it from its habitual and damaged history.

One work of art cannot change the world, and many believe that the best a work of art can do is change the artist. Shimon Attie created *MetroPAL.IS.* not as a solution, but rather as an experiment. As Wallace Stevens wrote, “All poetry is experimental poetry.”⁶ Attie’s complex poetic song to the Israeli and Palestinian peoples offers no resolution, but rather an experience in which weariness, prejudice, and antipathy can be temporarily suspended.

Richard Klein, interim co-director



1 Edward W. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 3.

2 A total of twenty-nine participants were filmed, but only twenty-four ended up being used in the piece.

3 Attie further reinforced notions of hybridity in the piece by the inclusion of two “drag queen” characters.

4 It is interesting to note that the Palestinian Declaration of Independence was written by the Palestinian poet and author Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008).

5 The structure that the vocal component of *MetroPAL.IS.* takes resembles a Greek Chorus, the homogenous group of secondary performers that accompanied the theater of Classical Greece. The Chorus commented with a collective voice on the dramatic action, expressing to the audience what the main characters could not say, such as their hidden fears or secrets.

6 Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, Milton J. Bates, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 187.



Shimon Attie with Vale Bruck

MetroPAL.IS., 2011

Eight-channel high-definition video installation

Digital video, color, sound; 11:41 minutes

Components: Eight 65-inch plasma monitors, eight MPEG players, eight studio monitor speakers, custom steel monitor stands

Installation dimensions variable

Editor and audio post-production: Paul Hill, Wexner Center for the Arts

Production Managers: Neta Zwebner-Zaibert and Hilla Medalia (kNow Productions)

Field Producer: Jamie Abrahams

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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Shimon Attie

look. look again.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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MetroPAL.I.S. (video stills), 2010