BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY: SHIMON ATTIE’S ART OF REMEMBRANCE

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, American-Jewish artist Shimon Attie traveled to the former Jewish quarter of Berlin and wondered “Where are all the missing people?” With this question in mind, Attie embarked on a two year project that involved converting black and white archival photographs of pre-war Jewish life in Berlin into slides and projecting them onto the sites they were originally taken. During the course of the one or two day installation, Attie would photograph the projection.

These photographs would become *The Writing on the Wall* series, in which Attie sought to reveal not what was but instead what was lost, using photography to evoke both absence and memory. As a work enacted in public space, Attie sought to reinhabit both the neighborhood and the minds of those who see his work with the memory of Berlin’s forgotten Jewish community, creating an active, experiential form of memory work. Through using the medium of photography in different ways, Attie thus creates a space in which history and memory converge: in their phantasmal form, the documentary historical photographs become transformed into a visual manifestation of memory.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

History...does not belong primarily to time, nor to succession, nor to causality, but to community, or to being-in-common. And this is so because community itself is historical. Which means that it is not a substance, nor a subject; it is not a common being, which could be the goal or culmination of a progressive process. It is rather a being-in-common which only happens, or which is happening, an event, more than a ‘being.’

-Jean-Luc Nancy

Photography has long been discussed in terms of its ability to capture a moment in time, suspending reality as a permanent trace of the past. The photographic document embodies what Roland Barthes described as “what has ceased to be,” visually arresting the past in a tangible object. In this capacity, photography became one of the primary media of the 20th century used to nurture and sustain memory following Andreas Huyssen’s assertion that “the past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory.” Indeed, the impetus behind Shimon Attie’s photographic series The Writing on the Wall, one series within his six-part Sites Unseen project, was born out of this need for articulating the past in a former Jewish neighborhood of Berlin, the Scheunenviertel, thereby creating a commentary on the absence of Germany’s murdered and deported Jews. In this project, Attie projected archival photographs of Berlin’s now vanished Jewish community onto the sites where they were originally taken. The site specific projection lasted for no longer than two days; during this time Attie photographed the projection. The resulting photographs became an integral component of his project, in that they function as a permanent record of the installation.

The works within Attie’s European series Sites Unseen, completed between 1991 and 1996, have been described by James Young as “acts of remembrance” which attempt to collapse

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the distinction between memory and the past, thus exposing the very gulf between what
happened in the past and how it now gets remembered. In so doing, Young explains that Attie’s
work “returns the burden of memory” to the viewer by compelling the audience to actively
engage with the past. Attie’s interest in memory work reflects the recent explosion of memory
discourse in the United States and Europe, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the early
1980s in the wake of decolonization and the push for alternative and revisionist histories. At the
fore of this discourse was the broadening debate focused on the Holocaust: following the
broadcast of the television series Holocaust, the emergence of the survivor testimony movement,
and the media attention paid to the anniversaries of events under the Third Reich (Hitler’s rise to
power, Kristallnacht, etc.), discussion of the Holocaust became more earnestly pursued. As
Huyssen notes, these predominantly “German anniversaries”—such as the historians’ debate of
1986, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and German national unification in 1990—received
intense coverage in the international media, and had important implications for American and
European Jewish memory and history.

It is within this milieu that Attie created The Writing on the Wall, in which Attie reveals
not what was but instead what was lost, using photography to evoke both absence and memory.
Indeed, there is a sense of loss and separation fundamental to photography which simulates the
perception of memory, yet paradoxically the medium is simultaneously everlasting and can be

4 James Young, (talk presented for the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative at the University of
Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, October 20, 2009).
5 The “historian’s debate” or the Historikerstreit took place in West Germany in the late 1980s and focused on the
way in which Nazi Germany and the Holocaust should be interpreted in history. The specific 1986 debate to which
Huyssen refers began when Ernst Nolte printed a speech entitled “The past that does not want to pass away.” In this
speech, Nolte claims that Nazi fascism was a reasonable reaction against the threat of Bolshevism; Jürgen Habermas
responded by rejecting this position and argued that such a claim could be seen as “a kind of canceling out of
damages” for the Holocaust. See Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? edited by Ernst Piper.
endlessly replicated. As Roland Barthes notes, photography holds a unique relation to the real
that is unlike other representational forms, a relation defined through indexicality as opposed to
artistic discourse and conventions. He writes: “I call ‘photographic referent’ not the optionally
real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed
before the lens, without which there would be no photography…The photograph is literally an
emanation of the referent.”7 This emanation is realized in Attie’s installations through
projection, allowing the former inhabitants of the Scheunenviertel to reinhabit their
neighborhood in the form of spectral apparitions. Much like a hazy memory slowly coming into
view, the figures and shop signs from Attie’s archival projections shimmer in and out of focus.
However, it is precisely this association with the real that lends photography its associations with
loss—what had been is no longer.

In using photography as a medium, Attie’s installations thus involve a complex layering
of memory, loss and history by literally bringing the absence of Berlin’s Jews to light through
their very presence in the form of ephemeral projections. Although much has been written about
Attie’s subject position as a second generation post-war artist and his preoccupation with loss,
absence, and remembering, this paper seeks to consider what is at stake for memory and history
as two separate but linked processes in The Writing on the Wall. As Attie creates a space in
which history and memory converges, the function of the archival photographs is twofold: on
one hand, he undoes the finality of the “take” and click of the shutter by projecting and
revitalizing the figures in the images. On the other, he paradoxically brings attention to that very
feature of photography—although these images are seemingly reanimated in their projections,
they nevertheless represent a past and a community that is gone forever. Attie is thus able to
bridge the distance between memory and history in his utilization of the projection—in their

phantasmal form, the documentary historical photographs become transformed into a visual manifestation of memory.

Also frequently under-discussed or bypassed all together, a close visual analysis of several prints will elucidate the way in which the artist’s chosen medium constructs a space in which memory and history collide in public space. Situated within the emergence of critical memory discourse, Attie’s *Writing on the Wall* thus stages an intervention in the *Scheunenviertel* by exploring the complicated relationship between memory and history and attempting to unite these two seemingly disparate notions of the past.
CHAPTER 2: POST-MEMORY

Born in 1957, the Jewish-American artist Shimon Attie describes that he has “always been interested in memory. I think a lot about the past, about my own past, and about the collective more generally, about the memory of entire communities.”

After receiving his M.F.A. with an emphasis in art and photography from San Francisco State University in 1991, Attie departed shortly thereafter for Germany where he would begin his *Writing on the Wall* installations.

The idea for this project, as Attie describes, grew out of his personal response to the city of Berlin. He discusses his awareness of the absence of Berlin’s missing Jews, saying “Walking the streets of the city that summer, I felt myself asking over and over again, ‘Where are all the missing people? What has become of the Jewish culture and community which had once been at home here?’”

Attie admits that when he first arrived in Berlin he was not a *tabula rasa* or “objective observer.” His experience in Germany was directly mediated through the childhood memories of stories about the war told to him by his parents and their friends, some of whom were Holocaust survivors.

Such mediation has been analyzed at length by Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term “post-memory” to describe artists, authors, filmmakers, and others whose work reflects their occupation of a second generational position to powerful, traumatic experiences such as the Holocaust.

Despite the fact that such events preceded their births, books, movies,

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10 Ibid, 9.
11 Laura Levitt is one scholar who has taken issue with the concept of post-memory—in her book *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust*, Levitt writes of her discomfort with the term after discussing it with two graduate students. All three women, Levitt and the two students, were born after the war but had very different relationships to the Holocaust and its past: one student was born in Germany but was not Jewish; another was an American Jew and the child of a child survivor; and Levitt is an American Jew. Levitt writes that “our experiences cannot ever be the same or in any simple way shared…we were unwilling ultimately to contain our hauntings within a singular stance, the position of the second generation” (36). While Hirsch’s term of post-memory is helpful in thinking about the second

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conversations, and other modes of communication allowed transmission on such a deep level that they seemed to constitute memories in their own right. Hirsch notes that “the ‘post’ in ‘post-memory’ signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath…[post-memory] reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture.”  For Hirsch, post-memory is not simply an abstract concept, but rather a structural framework in which traumatic knowledge and experience is inter- and trans-generationally transmitted.

Hirsch situates Attie within the milieu of artists working and reacting to their post-memory of the Holocaust. Attie writes that, “I learned through these stories [about the Holocaust]...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 had never had…was a powerful thread running through my childhood and has deeply influenced my work.” As a photographer, Attie’s personal connections to a past that could only be accessed through the memory of others is poignantly reminiscent of Susan Sontag’s observation that “people robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers.” Yet, perhaps due to his childhood influences, Attie was not simply struck by absence as he wandered through Berlin—instead, he found himself mentally projecting the Jewish communities he had learned about onto a German landscape he had never known except in his own imagination. As he repopulated these neighborhoods in his mind’s eye,

generation and their responses to the war and the Holocaust, then, I want to be clear that I am in no way collapsing and normalizing the experiences, memories, or legacies between people that Levitt takes issue with. Rather, I am using Hirsch’s term as a way of entering into a method of critically engaging with the Holocaust from a distanced vantage point that is nevertheless valid and important.

he felt the presence of Berlin’s absent Jews. However, as Michelle Friedman notes, that absence seemed unmarked by the city’s geography and unnoticed among the city’s residents.¹⁵

CHAPTER 3: THE SCHEUNENVIERTEL

Attie’s “post-memory,” which so de-objectified the artist’s experience in Berlin, became entangled with historical fact as he embarked on a three month search in a number of archives in an effort to make visual a past that seemed to have been forgotten. He explored a large range of archives: press archives, government archives of the city of Berlin, state archives, Jewish community archives, the private archive of Eike Geisel, a now-deceased political scientist, and the private photo albums of Jewish families in Berlin. Attie described this stage of the project as research intensive and involved spending hours in the archives. Even the simple act of understanding the cityscape became a challenge—because Berlin’s streets were renumbered after the war, Attie poured over old city maps in an effort to orient himself to the relationship between the pre- and post-war layout of the neighborhoods in the city. Among the documents in the archives, Attie located photographs from Berlin’s former Jewish quarter dating back to the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas by the end of the 1920s most German Jews were loyal to their country, assimilated, and relatively prosperous—they served in the German army and contributed to every field of German science, business, and culture—the Jewish quarter, the Scheunenviertel, was quite different. Located in the eastern part of the city, the Scheunenviertel had been the quarter of the Jewish working class—Attie writes that “the quarter’s name derives from the barns, Scheune, built in many backyards during the 18th and 19th centuries to house the farm animals.

17 In Attie’s catalogue Writing on the Wall: Projections in Berlin’s Jewish Quarter, the German author and director Erin Leiser writes of his past experiences in the Scheunenviertel as a young man. To him, the renaming of this neighborhood’s streets for “antifascist resistance fighters who never lived there” was inexcusable. He goes on to quote Regina Sheer, who writes in her book Ahawa, das vergessene Haus (Ahava: The Forgotten House): “Eradicating the street names amounted to obliterating the traces of Jews who left nothing behind but their addresses on the deportation lists of the Gestapo.” For Leiser, the memories of that neighborhood are tied to the street names that, once reassigned, lost the identity of that quarter. 15.
brought by people coming from the countryside.’” However, this area of Berlin also had a bad reputation: black marketers and prostitutes openly plied their trades, and it is for this reason that the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Berlin dubbed the neighborhood the *finstere medine*, Yiddish for “dark district.”

Unlike the assimilated German Jews living mostly in the western part of the city, the Jews of the Scheunenviertel were known as Ostjüden, Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants who had come from the East to settle in Berlin during the early 20th century. These Ostjüden were very visible Orthodox Jews, keeping their beards, forelocks, long coats, and fur trimmed hats. Interspersed with German, the signage and storefronts in the neighborhood also included Hebrew and Yiddish, which was reflected in the mostly anonymous press archival photographs Attie found. This selection of archival images was integral to his project throughout the process of sifting through the archives and traveling to the Scheunenviertel—many of the photographs in Attie’s installation demonstrate characteristics of Jewish specificity, such as language and dress. Although Attie’s interest in photographs visibly demonstrating Jewish “difference” may appear exploitative to represent these figures as “other,” Attie had very specific intentions with his choice in images. Instead of photographs of persecution and death of the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, Attie chose to project images that captured simple, ordinary pictures of Jewish life before the war. Although Attie is representing a community that has been annihilated, there is not

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19 Ibid, 10.
20 Ibid.
21 Although I will not address the fraught topic of the archive in this paper, it must be noted that this topic has been addressed at length in philosophical and art historical texts, journals, and conferences, as well as art exhibitions. See Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever;* Carolyn Steedman’s *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History;* Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive;* Antoinette Burton, ed. *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History.* One such art exhibition includes a 2008 show entitled *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at the International center of Photography.
evidence of that annihilation in the images—instead the viewer can reconsider the neighborhood in terms of what had existed prior to the Nazi regime.

In the course of choosing the archival images, Attie visited the Scheunenviertel multiple times and used the photographs to construct an idea of what the neighborhood had looked like in pre-war Berlin. His initial aim was to match the historical photographs with the original sites, using the old city maps and the photographs as a guide. However, he soon discovered that many of the buildings photographed sixty years earlier had either been bombed during the war or torn down. Many were rebuilt in the “mass produced” style of the so-called Plattenbauten, a type of building constructed out of large, prefabricated concrete slabs, which were common during the socialist regime.22 It also proved difficult to uncover suitable photographs for his project—in some cases he used images from other Jewish quarters and ghettos in Eastern Europe, which he only conceded to when he felt it was important to work with a particular site for which no pre-war photograph survived.23 Thus, Attie had to respond to the Scheunenviertel and archival photographs as they existed during the 1990s: “When it was not possible to project onto the original architecture, the projections were made onto neighboring buildings...The images I chose needed to be sufficiently clear and have a strong architectural component capable of interacting with the structures existing today.” He goes on to admit that, “When it was necessary to choose between being a good historian and—hopefully—a good artist, I always chose the latter.”24

It is clear that Attie’s project was not meant as an exercise in historical precision—instead, he hoped to project the images of the neighborhood’s former Jewish residents into the minds and memories of those who walked Berlin’s streets and saw his installations. In this way Attie situates his work in the gap created between history and memory, a space that is produced

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22 Ibid, 10.
23 Ibid, 11.
24 Ibid.
out of projecting photographs from a pre-Holocaust period onto the post-Holocaust landscape. Here, history and memory are problematized on multiple levels—through the artist’s “post-memory” of this community, the use of archival photographs, and the projection on sites which may not only be inaccurate, but have changed and transformed greatly since the photographs were taken. It seems particularly appropriate that Attie would state that “The Writing on the Wall project should be seen as simulation of Jewish life as it once existed in the Scheunenviertel, but not as a literal reconstruction.”25

25 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4: THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Attie began this “simulation” through the projection of slides made out of the archival photographs beginning in September of 1991 and continued to project different images intermittently for one year. The artist described his project as a type of “guerilla art” which was low-tech and without fanfare, utilizing only a second-hand projector and his camera as his instruments of choice. At the sites, he was joined by a single assistant who would help set up the installation. Unlike his later works which would necessitate huge teams of assistants, technical support and sophisticated machinery, this project was remarkably simple. The intimate and even unassuming nature of Writing on the Wall made possible an extremely personal interaction between Attie, the work of art, and the residents of the neighborhood in a way that would have been difficult to achieve with a large-scale production.

While Attie projected the photographs for one or two evenings, the installation was visible to local residents, passersby, and street traffic. When creating the installations, Attie did not choose to project the entire archival photograph onto the site. Rather, he projected only small portions or fragments onto the contemporary structures, wanting “the projections to serve as insertions into the visual field of the present.” These “insertions” were frequently roughly cropped, which made the image appear to be a part of the façade of the building. In fact, Attie has mentioned that if his cropping did not achieve the desired effect, he would simply use a black marker to further “rough up” the image’s border in order to make the photograph look more natural in its projected location. Although the archival images presuppose historical veracity, Attie’s mediation of these images to suit the site challenges notions of accuracy and reliability—

26 Shimon Attie, (talk presented for the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, October 19, 2009).
Attie edits the photographs in a manner similar to the way in which a historian privileges and mediates the past through the stories that are chosen to be told.28

The effect of using the façade of architectural structures as a screen also emphasizes both illusionistic and sculptural properties, providing both texture and surface variance to the image. Because of the uneven surface of the façade and different projections and recessions, the photographic figures are thus given physical presence and mass. No longer confined to the two dimensional small-scale photographic image, the projection allows the figures and shops to seemingly occupy three dimensional space. As a result, Attie dissolves the boundaries between the past and present by displaying scenes that have been there in memory only hidden from sight, revealing the traumatic history hidden within the sites of his projections.29

28 In “The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography,” Ariella Azoulay is critical of those histories that utilize photography as objective documents while ignoring the social relations at play, an issue that is certainly at play in the archives Attie referenced in this project. She states “These histories are written from a hegemonic viewpoint that accepts the institutionalization of photography as a movement toward progress. In addition, they fail to consider the primary, constitutive link between the State or sovereign power and photography…” 41.
29 Michelle A. Friedman, 37.
CHAPTER 5: WHAT THE WAR SPARED…

While the installations were in progress, Attie photographed the projection with a long exposure lasting three to four minutes. Attie thus combines the installations, which he has also called “events on location,” with two modes of photographic production: altering the archival images with cropping and projection and then creating new objects in his studio once the installation has ended.³⁰ Michael A. Bernstein comments on Attie’s photographs, stating “the richly saturated colors, deliberate cropping, camera angles, and the “framed-ness” of each image add an aesthetically expressive quality not necessarily found in the installations.”³¹ As with any photograph, peripheral scenes are cut out; the artist was able to create multiple prints of the same installation and choose the one he preferred; the color is altered and is not always representative of what one would have seen on site. Indeed, Attie does not view his photographs merely as a record of the installations, but sees the documentation of the installation as an integral creative component of his work, stating that “through conscious composition and framing, their [the photograph’s] purpose is to point to the larger relationship between the installation and the environment in which it takes place.”³²

In his photographs, one of the most potent and visually arresting features of the relationship created between Attie’s projection and the existing architecture of the neighborhood can be seen in the contrast between the Hebrew lettering of the black and white projection and the post-Berlin Wall graffiti. The projected lettering in Mulackstraße 32, Berlin: Former kosher butcher’s shop, 1930 (1992) superimposes a once operative kosher butcher shop over an abandoned apartment building (Figure 1). This print juxtaposes the Hebrew of the projection

³¹ Ibid.
with contemporary post-unification slogan graffiti—on a concrete wall to the right of the projection reads *Der kampf geht weiter,* “the struggle continues,” in large black letters. There is no sign of residents or passersby in this image; the only evidence of human life is two lights in an apartment building in the background of the photograph. It seems that an unseen street light illuminates the graffiti-laden concrete wall (Attie did not provide lighting besides the projection) which leaves the apartment building on which the butcher shop is projected awash in a blue shadow. Contrasted with the stark geometric forms of the mass produced *Plattenbauten* in the background, the apartment building is a mix of brick, concrete, and stone with missing and boarded windows.

Attie presents a different angle of the same building in a second image, *Mulackstraße 37, Berlin: Former kosher butcher’s shop and laundry, 1930 (1992)* (Figure 2). Still projecting the kosher butchery found in Figure 1, the viewer is introduced to a prior occupant: a laundress standing in the doorway surrounded by more contemporary graffiti. This photograph offers the viewer a fuller view of the building, including the concrete wall declaring “the struggle continues,” as well as the space to the left of the butcher shop where the laundry is located. The laundress looks relaxed and unaware of the photographer, and therefore unaware of the viewer as well, and stands leisurely with her hands in her pockets. The third image in this miniseries completes the view of the apartment building—in *Mulackstraße 37, Berlin: Former Jewish Residents 1932 (1992)* two forlorn-looking and bedraggled children sit on a curb (Figure 3). One child looks directly out at the viewer, matter-of-factly acknowledging the photographer’s presence. As with the other photographs of this building, the apartment complex as it existed in the early 1990s is clearly falling apart, complete with torn curtains and chipping paint. Against the wall, scaffolding stands unused and appears to imply a futile and perhaps abandoned attempt
at renovation. Piles of dirt and construction rubble to the left of the scaffolding seem to indicate a recent demolition—perhaps the apartment building is next.

In all three images the contrast between past and present is made apparent not only in the layering of the black and white projection on the contemporary architecture, but also in the objects and buildings Attie chooses to include. *Mulackstraße 32, Berlin: Former kosher butcher’s shop, 1930* draws attention to the *Plattenbauten* in juxtaposition of old and new forms and the small, lit windows contrasted by the shadowy aged building. In the photograph of the Jewish laundress and butchery, the background recedes on a sharp diagonal, a conscious compositional element. A line of light, caused by a bicycle riding through the long exposure time of the photograph, draws the viewer’s eye along the curbside. The street is a patchwork of potholes, implying the history of the road through its many layers and transformations; its disrepair echoes the dilapidated apartment building and run-down, dirty sidewalk. Cars line the curb and street lights recede far into the distance, casting an eerie hazy blue light, as the laundress overlooks the street from her shop.

*Mulackstraße 37, Berlin: Former Jewish Residents 1932* is similar in that clearly contemporary technology is juxtaposed with an older time period. The powerful symbol of Berlin’s *Fernsehturm*, the former television tower of East German state television before German reunification, dominates the left side of this photograph. The immense futuristic spire pierces the empty sky in the photograph’s background, paralleling the verticality of the run-down apartment building. The brightly illuminated apartments beneath the tower, and the juxtaposition of different architectural types, only enhance the gap between old and new, then and now. The image is thus visually split between past and present—the right side of the image, occupied by
the starving children in front of a decrepit apartment building, is put into stark contrast with the
new, glittering, standardized forms of the post-war era.

In these images, the aforementioned contemporary graffiti\textsuperscript{33} plays a poignant role: when
all three photographs are considered together, the white graffiti above the apartment building’s
doorway reads Was der Krieg verschonte, überlebt im Sozialismus nicht! Roughly translated,
this anti-socialist slogan denotes, “What the war spared does not survive under socialism!” In
Figure 1, the only German legible is Sozialismus nicht! or “not socialism!” while in Figure 3 Was
der Krieg verschonte, or “what the war spared,” is clearly readable. It is notable that Attie pairs
“not socialism” with an archival image of a business, considering socialism stood for a socio-
economic system in which property and the distribution of wealth were subject to social control.
The cropping of Mulackstraße 37, Berlin: Former Jewish Residents 1932, arguably one of the
most powerful images in The Writing on the Wall, also makes use of the relationship between the
contemporary graffiti and Attie’s chosen archival image. In this photograph, Attie implies that
the façade’s graffiti pertains to the pitiful victims of the Depression who are projected huddling
on the curb. As the child looks unabashedly out at the viewer, the image also recalls both the
dying Jews in photographs of European ghettos and the survivors of concentration camps.\textsuperscript{34}
Without using the iconic imagery of the Holocaust, this image nevertheless seems to say, “You
could have stopped this, and instead you have forgotten us.” Attie thus connects the Jewish past
of the Scheunenviertel with images that evoke its horrific end.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} The interplay between the spray-painted textual graffiti and Attie’s projected images is worth noting—just as the
artist publicly writes with light in order to reinvigorate the neighborhood with its seemingly forgotten memory, the
graffiti is also meant to communicate messages about post-war Berlin. Although ephemeral and impermanent, Attie
performs his own type of graffiti, branding the facades temporarily with his mark as an artist and commentator.
Attie’s piece \textit{Between Dreams and History} from 1998 expands on his interest in graffiti by projecting written text
onto public buildings in the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

\textsuperscript{34} Ziva Amishai-Maisels. “Haunting the Empty Place” Stephen C. Feinstein. \textit{Absence/Presence}. (Syracuse, NY:

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
The photographs in this “miniseries” speak to Attie’s vested interest in how contemporary architecture relates to the archival images he selected. The entire sentence, “What the war spared does not survive under socialism,” is multifaceted in relationship to Attie’s projection: anti-socialist, anti-East German graffiti is painted on the wall of a building after the fall of the Berlin Wall which is put in relationship with pre-war Jewish history, the Holocaust, and post-German re-unification history. The layering of histories in Berlin is made even more palpable when considering that the buildings in this neighborhood would have likely been destroyed had they been on the other side of the Wall—while the west side of the city underwent extensive rebuilding, the past has been preserved in east Berlin where the Scheunenviertel is located. By thus dividing the graffiti through deliberate cropping and projecting different images at different times on the same site, yet still allowing for the miniseries to function as a visual unit, Attie’s images literally bring to light the troubled memories of this site’s past.

In a much more quietly provocative print with a very different color palette, Attie’s *Joachimstraße/Ecke Auguststraße, Berlin: Former Jewish Resident, 1931* (1992) contrasts a glowing sunset with religious iconography (Figure 4). Like the apartment building of the previous three photographs, the building in the left foreground is showing clear signs of age—the white paint beneath the projection flakes away from the wall and the brick shows signs of wear. In the projection, the barely visible head of a Jew in prayer phylacteries sits beneath a white Star of David; the image is projected over the doorway of the somewhat decaying building.\(^{\text{36}}\) The star stands in stark, formally eloquent contrast to three rows of crucifix-like white windowpanes on the dark building to the right, presumably across the street, arrayed like a battle formation of

\(^{\text{36}}\) Phylacteries are either of two small, black, leather cubes containing a piece of parchment inscribed with verses 4–9 of Deut. 6, 13–21 of Deut. 11, and 1–16 of Ex. 13; one is attached with straps to the left arm and the other to the forehead during weekday morning prayers by Orthodox and Conservative Jewish men.
Seemingly implying good versus evil, the sunset above the older building in the foreground mimics a halo, radiating out from the roof of the structure, while the darkness of the newer building across the street is paralleled in the sky above. In an intense but poignant approach, Attie’s composition implies that the Jews were a minority in a Christian city—the solitary Jewish figure, made explicitly clear through the Star of David symbol, is contrasted with row upon row of crucifix-like forms. The architecture occupying the photograph parallels the dichotomy of the religious iconography as well—the left hand building is clearly older in contrast to the apartment building on the right, which was constructed during the Communist regime. Attie thus utilizes two artistic devices, the projection as well as compositional strategies, to emphasize the relationship between past and present.

While the previous photographs highlight the Jewish community that has since been lost to Berlin, *Linienstraße 137, Berlin: Police raid on former Jewish Residents, 1920 (1992)* targets a different type of memory (Figure 5). In this seemingly benign image, Attie matches a scene of men, women, and children standing on the curb to the original building which is now well-lit and furnished with house plants and window treatments. Unlike the previous works, this photograph has been taken with less distance between the camera and the projected surface—the nooks and crannies of the building’s façade, the numbered security panel near the door, and even the somewhat crooked blinds on the window are visible. The faces and clothing of the projected individuals are also much clearer than in the aforementioned photographs; in particular, the piercing sideways glance of the right-most figure is quite startling. The close proximity to the projection and clear view of the figures in the image allows a close inspection, in which it becomes clear that the figures on the left are not residents of the *Scheunenviertel*—they are members of the German police. In this deceivingly neutral archival image, Attie has projected a

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police raid on the houses of Jewish residents. Thus, not only do Attie’s projections return Berlin’s Jewish presence to haunt the city but also their sufferings and the crimes committed against them.38

One of the most striking aspects of the relationship between the projected image and the façade on which it is projected is the complex layering between the past and present as well as absence and presence. Like fragments of a collage, the archival photographs of the Jewish quarter were fused onto the modern setting—on one hand, it seems as if the projection has opened a portal from the past, like a glowing door allowing passage back in time. The former residents seem to step into the present from the decrepit building facades of the Scheunenviertel; Attie describes this effect, saying he wanted “to peel back the wallpaper of today and reveal the history underneath.”39 In doing so, Attie hoped to unfix the stasis of photography with movement and life, thus allowing the figures of the archival photographs to break out of the constraint of their frames and revisit their former neighborhood. This allows the past to seemingly occupy the present in a manner that disavows the most fundamental characteristics of photography, if only for the length of the installation. As Michael A. Bernstein comments, part of the power of a photograph depends on the viewers trust that for each picture a physical reality existed at a specific moment in time and that unique moment was captured at the click of the camera’s shutter.

On the other hand, however, the constructed nature of the projection and editing of the photograph paradoxically draws attention to the artifice of the image—these figures, and this community, are gone. Despite Attie’s efforts to project the image onto the site they were originally taken, this moment is completely constructed and mediated through the artist’s hand.

38 Amishai-Maisels, 136.
39 Shimon Attie, as quoted in At Memory’s Edge by James E. Young. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000) 70.
There is no way to bring back this past moment or know how this memory existed at the moment it was taken; only the specters of the past are brought back in this installation, which can never be the same as a living, breathing past. Rather, the viewer’s memory of the projection is one that encompasses their experience in seeing it: the projection reinvigorates memory of the neighborhood’s past through awareness of the present. Indeed, “each picture also measures the temporal and spatial distance that separates the moment and place of our viewing it from the moment and place the image was made.”40

The historical photographs that Attie uses to create his projections also demonstrate such distance—they show that which cannot be brought back in time or space. Yet, Attie’s projections release these photographs from their bounded object status and attempt to bridge both the temporal and spatial distance Bernstein describes. In this sense, photographs which record specific moments in history and place become transformed into a visual manifestation of memory. Even though the Scheunenviertel community has been annihilated, there is no evidence of that annihilation in the images—instead one may actually revisit this past, briefly, and remember what had existed in the past. In doing so, Attie does not merely present a critique on the neighborhood’s past or the Holocaust more broadly—instead he is actually intervening at the site. No longer confined to the archive or history textbooks, the images of this Jewish community are brought back home. This is where the gap between history and memory, and the distance created between the viewer and the photograph, is closed, however briefly. Still, this memory is highly mediated—through the archive and what is deposited there; through the artist and his choice in image and editing. Despite the poignancy of the ghostly apparitions and the lost community they represent, nothing can bring these individuals back—in attempting to measure the temporal and spatial distance between then and now, Attie reveals how much has

40 Bernstein, 6.
truly been lost. Further, in undoing the finality of the “take” and the click of the shutter, Attie also brings attention to that very finality—the projection is ephemeral in both form and duration. Thus, in their projection, the archival photographs literally transform into what Sontag has characterized as “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.”

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41 Sontag, 16.
Although the haunting effect of the projection is an integral component of *The Writing on the Wall*, such an effect would not have been as convincing or meaningful without the use of photography in both the archival images and the photographs of Attie’s installations. It is the precise etymology of the word photograph, meaning “writing with light,” that defines Attie’s methodology—the title of his piece is *The Writing on the Wall*, after all. Though photographs are typically taken to capture and preserve the present, the stillness of a photograph nevertheless emphasizes the untouchable loss of a past moment in time. Because the mechanism of the camera allows an image to capture what Susan Sontag has termed “what remains,” photography has been described as a visual, and physical, manifestation of memory.\(^{42}\)

The relationship between photography and loss has been discussed at length by Susan Sontag. In her seminal collection of essays *On Photography*, Sontag asserts that photographs capture the “injuries of time,” affirming, at their most fundamental, the subject’s “thereness.”\(^{43}\) In this sense, the photographs Attie used in his projections can be thought to function as a kind of *memento mori*, a concept echoed by Sontag:

> Photography is the inventory of mortality…people being so irrefutably there… One’s reaction to the photographs Roman Vishniac took in 1938 of daily life in the ghettos of Poland is overwhelmingly affected by the knowledge of how soon all these people were to perish…Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.\(^{44}\)

Without a doubt, the presumed death of the people in Attie’s installations is a powerful component of his work. However, this is not the focus of his project. While Vishniac’s photographs were intended to preserve a community he knew would soon be lost, Attie’s

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\(^{42}\) Ibid, 9.
\(^{43}\) Ibid, 69.
\(^{44}\) Ibid, 70.
intentions were not like that of an anthropologist. Rather, Attie sought to reinhabit both the neighborhood and the minds of those who see his work with the memory of Berlin’s forgotten Jewish community, creating an active, experiential form of memory work.

The enduring, endlessly replicated physical object of the photograph seems to conflict with the preoccupation of loss, absence, and ephemerality in Attie’s work. Even Sontag states that “photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still.”45 In less insistent terms, the indexical trace embodied in a photograph follows along Sontag’s reasoning—the physical relationship between the object photographed and the resulting image does necessitate a reading of the photograph as a frozen moment in time that is now lost and can never exist as reality again. As Christian Metz notes, photography acts as a “pure index, stubbornly pointing to the print of what was, but no longer is.”46 In Metz’s definition, the archival photographs Attie employs certainly performs an indexical function—Berlin’s Jewish neighborhood is represented as what it had been but, as Metz would say, no longer is. However, Attie’s work problematizes the conception of the archival trace in its projection which frees the memory of Berlin’s Jews from their prison of the forgotten. The images of the former Jewish inhabitants of Berlin are thus no longer confined by the frame of their photograph nor the archival depository, but instead allowed to reoccupy the neighborhood in which they were taken, burning the past into the present. Indeed, though Attie’s installations highlight loss, they do so through additive means. In these installations, Attie opens up the past into the present in the illusory act of projecting archival images which disallows for static memory: the projections demand an engagement of this neighborhood’s memory as a living, though lost, past. Attie has even stated that the projected image is a physical embodiment of the

process of memory itself: “Like memory, the projection appears to have substance and materiality, but in fact it does not—it is only photons...an illusion.”47

In fact, the characteristics of the projected archival images actually appear to mimic the nature of memory—the grainy black and white photography and wispy quality of the projection seem to materialize as apparitions of the past memory of the Scheunenviertel, like ghosts embodying the return of their repressed history. As Ziva Amishai-Maisels has noted, this sensation was made even more evident “when the projections were done on site, when people not only passed by but, by entering a house or opening a window, literally passed through these transparent phantoms.”48 However, this effect also makes one even more aware of the ephemerality of the past projected onto the present—the projection is intangible and transient. The installations themselves are all the more fleeting because the projection will inevitably be turned off, adding a second degree of ephemerality: in The Writing on the Wall, the projection of light is as transitory as the installation itself. In this way, Attie thematizes the sense of disconnect and loss elemental to photography by what Michael A. Bernstein calls “evoking specters from a world which was never allowed to become the past through the normal rhythms of gradual evolution and decay; a world whose brutal obliteration has made its nonexistence a question haunting our lives and practices today.”49 Attie thus takes as his subject not the Scheunenviertel as it used to be, but the actual loss of a community that no longer exists.

48 Ziva Amishai-Maisels, 134.
CHAPTER 7: THE WRITING ON THE WALL AND PUBLIC SPACE

While the ethereal quality of Attie’s projections emphasizes the impermanence of their existence they nevertheless give the sites a renewal of their past. In doing so, the installations serve to restore the memory of this past within the people who see his work; as the projections of the Scheunenviertel’s former Jewish residents return to their former neighborhood, the images will continue to haunt the mind and memory of those who view the installations. Throughout the course of the Writing on the Wall project, Attie did indeed have many people react to the installations. Attie describes several encounters:

One gentleman in his fifties responded quite emotionally, telling me that his Jewish grandfather, who he’d never known, had been deported to Auschwitz…One man, seeing a projection on his building, called the police, protesting that his neighbors would think he was Jewish…Towards the final three months of the project, the situation in East Berlin had begun to worsen to the point where I was harassed and threatened in some way almost every evening by someone who was often, but not always, drunk.  

In a lecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Attie describes yet another encounter, one that took place at the site for the photograph entitled Almstadtstraße 43, Berlin (Former Hebrew bookstore, 1930) (Figure 6): “The window above the projection opened and an old woman looked down at the image. She then looked at me and said ‘No, no, no.’ ‘No, no, no, what?’ I responded. She looked at me and simply said ‘It was a little to the right.’” At the same location, Attie recalls that “A door opened and a man came running towards me, wagging his finger, saying ’My father bought this house fair and square from Mr. Jacob in 1938.’ ‘Do you know what happened to Mr. Jacob after 1938?’ I asked. He responded ‘Why naturally, he was a multi-millionaire and moved to New York.’ As if that’s what happened to all German Jews….Naturally.”

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Yet, the point was not necessarily to illicit a positive or negative reaction among those who viewed the installation. Rather, it was meant to stimulate consciousness of the Scheunenviertel’s buried history. For by itself, this neighborhood lacks what Pierre Nora has called “the will to remember”—without a deliberate act of remembrance, the buildings of Berlin’s Jewish quarter remain little more than inert pieces of the cityscape.\textsuperscript{51} Attie describes his efforts to breathe life into this “will to remember,” stating “I am trying to give visual form to history and memory which is latent in the architecture and landscape of the present, latent but not visible.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, at his lecture at the University of Illinois, the artist describes his desire to return memory to the “mind’s eye of the visitor.”\textsuperscript{53} Just as Attie repopulated Berlin with its veiled past in his own mind as he wandered the streets of the city, he hoped to replicate that experience for others through his artwork.

To achieve this goal, the social and experiential aspects of \textit{Writing on the Wall} became integral components of the series—because the projections took place in public locations, the relationship between the projection and the viewer was extremely important.\textsuperscript{54} In thinking about Attie’s project as working within public space, Maurice Halbwachs’s theories on memory are particularly applicable. In his seminal text \textit{On Collective Memory}, Halbwachs discusses the social aspect of memory and highlights the importance of social exchange in the construction of memory. For Halbwachs, memory is developed in social spaces and nurtured through interactions among people. Such interactions were vital to Attie’s work, as evidenced by the previously cited responses of the people who live in the contemporary Scheunenviertel.

\textsuperscript{52} Alexander Stille “History of Another.” Shimon Attie, \textit{History of Another}. (Sante Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2004). 3
\textsuperscript{53} Shimon Attie, (talk presented for the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, October 21, 2009).
\textsuperscript{54} For more on art in public space, see \textit{Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy}, edited by Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster.
neighborhood. While Attie’s projections are undoubtedly poignant and affective on an individual level, an important exchange was developed within the neighborhood in which these projections were made. Because these pieces existed in the public sphere rather than the protected and even privileged space of a gallery or museum, the sites themselves, and the implications of the projections, challenged the viewers in terms of how they engaged with the work as they likewise interacted with each other and the artist. Issues of complicity, responsibility, and even guilt or the desire to defend oneself are brought to the fore in this piece, feelings that were expressed by viewers and observed by Attie at the site of the installation. In fact, the reactions of the neighborhood residents could not have been more fitting—although the goal of Writing on the Wall was to make the object of memory the distance between then and now, the responses demonstrated how small that distance actually was in their memory. While many people who saw Attie’s installations likely did not remember or even know about the neighborhood’s Jewish past, ostensibly there were people who actually could remember—and the reactions proved that many did.

In Writing on the Wall, Attie operates in the space between past and present and likewise in the gap of what is remembered and forgotten. By projecting the archival images at their original sites as much as possible, the value of place and its relationship to memory is thus tied to the neighborhood’s veracity as a site of memory. Although the buildings of the Scheunenviertel lack the will to remember, this site is not without memory: despite the fact that Attie describes his efforts to return the memory of this neighborhood to all who view his installations, for many viewers this memory was not completely forgotten. As the viewer responses demonstrate, many of the current residents of the Scheunenviertel did in fact remember the history of this site. One may even speculate the gentleman whose father had bought his house from Mr. Jacob had a post-
memory of this neighborhood, if not a direct memory—it is impossible to say what kinds of memories those might be, but it seems quite obvious that the neighborhood residents were at least vaguely familiar with the Scheunenviertel’s past. Indeed, while there is a shared sense of place in that Attie temporarily reinhabits the neighborhood with images of its previous Jewish community, he likewise reinhabits the common experiences and memories of that former community within the minds of those who live in the Scheunenviertel. This includes both groups of residents—those that have first-hand memories of this period of time, as well as those who do not. For those with first-hand memories, some of those memories may be unpleasant, such as the raid on the Jews of the neighborhood; some of them may have been positive, like recalling old friends. For residents who were unaware of the neighborhood’s past, storefronts and buildings will now be imbued with new meaning—the projections demonstrate what the current tenants have in common with the past residents. In consequence, although Attie highlights difference in choosing archival photographs that represent visibly Jewish individuals, the connection made between then and now becomes much more potent when viewers see the images laid over contemporary sites. Now, even for those who do not remember or did not know, the present can be visibly linked to the past. Though shops have changed, new tenants live in the apartments, and the surrounding landscape may be altered, there is still an important sense of common and shared identity—place and home. Indeed, the viewers of Attie’s installations and the subjects in the archival images shared the same private world in the Scheunenviertel in the past and now, briefly, in the present.

The impact of the work on neighborhood residents and bystanders should not be underestimated: Attie has said that the residents’ responses were as much a part of the works as the installations themselves. James Young has elaborated on that point, suggesting that without
responses, the installation, like the buildings themselves, would have remained inert, inanimate, and dead. Echoing Halwachs, Young describes the importance of interpersonal relationships in the construction and perpetuation of memory with a specific focus on the way in which memory is enacted on the landscape—without the public acknowledgement and confrontation with the past represented in Attie’s site-specific projections, that past would simply remain hidden and forgotten. Young has also written that Attie’s work does not offer redemption to the viewer. While it could be argued that Attie’s Berlin work is perhaps passive aggressive, acting as an indictment in bringing the ghostly figures of Holocaust victims back to the scene of the crime (a kind of return of the repressed), it is clear that he is not attempting to use the archival images as accusatory. Rather, these installations were meant for the residents of the Scheunenviertel and passersby, to imprint this forgotten memory on their consciousnesses so that such works of remembrance are no longer necessary. In this sense, Young has characterized Attie’s work as pointedly anti-redemptory in that the installations transfer the burden of memory back onto the viewer.

By projecting the archival photographs on the original sites in which they were taken, the artist seemingly opens a portal of the past into the present using a method that roots the work in historical fact. Indeed, Attie’s detailed and exhaustive research further highlights the artist’s relationship to history in terms of David Lowenthal’s conception of “the historian” through the artist’s consultation of evidentiary (archival) materials. In using photographs, Attie seemingly consults the perfect type of documentary materials, as Sontag explains “Photographs furnish evidence…the camera record incriminates.” While the archival photographs function as the historical element in Writing on the Wall, memory is manifested in both the ephemeral projections and the viewers of the works: as has been previously discussed, the projections seem to imitate the qualities of memory in a manner meant to activate memory in the viewer. As documentation of an actual event, the photographs Attie produced could arguably also act as historical documents. These qualities demonstrate the seemingly obvious differences between history and memory: history is thought of as objective and factual while memory is subjective and contingent. Indeed, memory has no timeline and is not confined or subject to the same demands of history.

This distinct quality of memory was particularly important to Siegfried Kracauer, the German-Jewish writer, sociologist, cultural critic, and film theorist. Kracauer wrote on the connections and disparities between photography and memory prior to his forced exile of fascist Germany in 1933. Published in the October 28, 1927 edition of Frankfurter Zeitung, “Die Photographie” reflected Kracauer’s philosophical interest in photography and cinema. In contrast to Sontag, Kracauer asserts that photography is devoid of memory: he writes “Since nature changes in exact correspondence with the respective state of consciousness of a period,

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57 Sontag, 15.
the foundation of nature devoid of meaning arises with modern photography.” In other words, it is precisely photography, which is without memory and likewise incapable of grasping historical significance, that occupies a void of archival recording. At this point, in Kracauer’s terms, everyone and everything reverts to “the foundation of nature devoid of meaning.” If memory is sensory and indefinite, photography is without memory due to its limited objectivity.

Kracauer’s faith in photography as an objective and truthful medium bring to mind the inadequacies of photography. Indeed, the basis of total belief and faith in the photograph as a documentary record is due to the fact that it does not simply resemble an object but that it is actually affected by it. While painting and drawing can always feign the existence of an object, only with the photograph is the object a real necessity. However, in her essay “The Ethic of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography,” Ariella Azoulay points out that photography is a convention, whose meaning is taken for granted by societies which are accustomed to photography. Just like any other image, the photograph appears as “a group of marks with an obscure meaning, accompanied by graphics…or lingual signs…in order to assist in the creation of meaning from the group of marks.”

Contrary to the assumed truth value of photography, she asserts that “the photograph does not speak for itself, that what is seen in the photograph is not immediately given, and that its meaning must be constructed and agreed upon.”

Moreover, photographs can be easily manipulated and/or the camera only sees what the photographer wants the viewer to see. In reality, no artistic medium has the capacity for complete truth. Specifically, Attie’s work draws attention to the contradictions of the archives,

61 Ibid, 41.
which seemingly purport to serve an objective historical function. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have observed the use of photographic and archival documents in the personal, scholarly, and artistic work of post-memory, writing that “Invariably, archival photographic images appear in post-memorial texts in altered form: they are cropped, enlarged, projected into other images; they are reframed and de- or re- contextualized; they are embedded in new narratives, new texts; they are surrounded by new frames.” In The Writing on the Wall, Attie purposefully cropped the archival photographs to suit the aim of his projection and carefully composed the photographs taken of the installations themselves. In this respect, Azoulay cautions the public in complete unconditional trust in the photographer, pointing out that the photographer “may be biased by some particular interests.” She goes on to say that the civil contract of photography involves cultural dependency and although the photograph does indeed show what existed, there is “only ever a partial version of what appears to the eye…The spectator is required to construct what has been there from out of the visible, as well as to reconstruct what is not immediately manifest, but which can—in principal—become visible in the exact same photography.”

Indeed, for all photographs, the resulting image does not include the periphery—

Christian Metz discusses this off-frame space resulting “from a singular and definitive cutting off which…is figured by the “click” of the shutter. It marks the place of irreversible absence, a

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63 Azoulay’s essay focuses on this civil contract of photograph, explaining it in these terms: “Conquering the world as a picture means that every citizen could see—through photographs, and thus through the eyes of others—more than they could see by herself…The conquest of the world as a picture is enacted simultaneously by everyone who holds a camera, serves as the object of a photograph or looks at photographs.” Azoulay characterizes those that take part in this partnership of “everyone” as making up the “citizenry of photography.” This social context involves a plurality of people. The civil contract of photography, then, is “the agreement that allows the logic of photography to overpower social relations, while at the same time provide a point of resistance against photography’s total control, initiating a responsibility to prevent the completion of this very control.” 39.
64 Azoulay, 43.
place from which the look has been averted forever.”

Attie’s purposeful manipulation of the archival images results in a doubled peripheral cropping—both what had been excluded from the photograph at the point it was taken, as well as the components of the archival photograph Attie cut out. The importance of off-frame space is put into perspective in Figures 1-3: if this “miniseries” was not completed, or Attie chose to omit one of those images, the full statement of the graffiti would have been unknown. However, the intentional composition of Attie’s installation photographs adds a unique peripheral element: the viewers of the installation become part of the “off-frame” that is not included in the image. The residents of the neighborhood and other passersby occupy the unique space outside of Attie’s photograph, meant for a gallery, museum, or collector’s wall. It is they who complete the work and complete the story of this site.

With the truth value of photography already in question, it is important to consider that some of the projections used in Attie’s installations were not historically correct. In fact, some of the photographs chosen were not simply projected onto inaccurate sites but they were not from the Scheunenviertel or even from Berlin. While Attie’s intention had been to “simulate” the Scheunenviertel before the Holocaust, the implications of taking this artistic license with history are worth considering. Berel Lang is one scholar that believes “surely there might be loss, not gain, in the consciousness of artifice.”

Consider for a moment that a Holocaust memoir meant to represent an individual’s experience was found to be constructed of an amalgam of survivor’s stories or supplemented by the imagination—how far can the author, or artist, push the limits of truth if truth is understood as history? Lang contemplates whether the combination of art and history may have had a stronger impact on the audience if each one of the

65 Metz, 161.
pair had been made to stand by itself, concluding “Well perhaps—but certainly not if the
audience had first been given to understand that the works involved were not such syntheses, and
arguably not even if the audience were aware beforehand of the possibility.” While these
issues have come to the fore in literary works, particularly memoirs, the absence of information
from external sources in works like The Writing on the Wall problematizes the viewer’s ability to
distinguish between fact and fiction.

The artist as mediator continues with Attie’s choice of images that show Jews as
“other”—as visibly Jewish. In this subjective version of history, Attie projected images that
suited his memory of this neighborhood, despite the fact that it reflected a past he had not lived.
Reading this in terms of Halbwachian theory, Attie thus occupied a privileged position, one that
aided in the construction of the Scheunenviertel’s collective memory. From this position, the
articulation of the neighborhood’s memory was therefore in Attie’s hands. Despite this, Attie’s
work should not be taken as an inadequate response to the site or as inauthentic to that
neighborhood’s past. Instead, it can be argued that Attie’s deliberate use of cropping and
specific archival images actually helps to illuminate his intent. Although one may criticize
Attie’s use of “visibly Jewish” Jews in his installations, the use of assimilated Jews in his
projections would not have achieved the purpose of his work. In fact, James Young has pointed
out that “because German Jewry was often so well assimilated as to appear effectively invisible,
Attie had to rely on the image of Ostjüden to make visible the otherwise invisible Jews of
Germany—even though they themselves were not representative faces of German Jewry
itself.” It was important that Attie show that different to demonstrate what was lost—he used
the photographs of the Ostjüden because of what they represented, not because they represented

all the Jews living in Germany during that time. In spite of the choice of photographs that “other” the neighborhood’s Jewish community and the fact that Attie used a selection of images that were not originally taken in Berlin’s Jewish neighborhood, *The Writing on the Wall* makes manifest a past that still remained secret and hidden within Berlin’s cityscape.

The working through of Germany’s troubled history has been taken up by many artists, particularly among those that did not actually live through the war. For many artists of the post-war generation, addressing the Holocaust became a preoccupation on an international scale. With this generational distance in mind, Attie’s work can be discussed as being located precisely in what Andreas Huyssen calls “twilight memory:” it is both the reflection of the generational distance of the artist from the Holocaust and also a project of reinhabiting those spaces and sites of twilight memory, that moment on the edge of forgetting that Attie resists. James Young has also written extensively on this subject, particularly in how Attie experienced the trauma of the Holocaust second-hand, yet those experiences had nevertheless shaped his imagination and his knowledge of the world. For the artist, his knowledge of the Holocaust was not direct but mediated through his family and survivors that that told him stories of the war—what Hirsch has characterized as post-memory. Indeed, the only access the post-war generation has to the Holocaust is through the negotiation of conversations with survivors, countless histories and novels of Holocaust they have read, and the photographs and movies they have seen. As Young has stated, Attie occupies a generation that is simultaneously haunted by the Holocaust but is

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69 In a later series that was incorporated into the *Sites Unseen* project, Attie did use photographs of the assimilated Jewish community. This body of work, entitled *Trains: Dresden* (1993), involved a similar process to *Writing on the Wall*. Using photographs from the family albums of Dresden’s Jewish community, Attie converted the images into slides and projected them in various locations in the city’s central railway station.
cognizant of their distance to that history. This distance is one Attie acknowledges in his work, as he states:

I wanted to give this invisible past a voice, to bring it to light, if only for some brief moments. I do not see myself as a “Holocaust artist.” Rather, my work is a response to specific places as well as to changing life circumstances. Memory, history, and identity have always been important themes in my work… [Writing on the Wall] is my personal response to being in Germany, and to my search for a people and culture that I would never know.

For the artist, the project was not necessarily to repopulate Berlin with the city’s long since destroyed Jewish population, but to illuminate the haunting presence of their absence.

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70 James Young, (talk presented for the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, October 22, 2009).
Today, the Scheunenviertel is a neighborhood that has undergone rapid gentrification. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, it became the new chic quarter for many West Berliners and as a result, the neighborhood has seen a huge influx of new residents and capital from the West. Within the course of only a few years, the houses and buildings of the neighborhood have become completely transformed: most have been entirely renovated, from the inside out, and others have been repurposed into fashionable and trendy bars and restaurants. Because of this, the neighborhood has become completely unrecognizable in the years since the Writing on the Wall project was realized in 1992-3. Attie remarks that “the remaking of the Scheunenviertel affects both Jewish as well as post-war East German collective memory and identity, as the last physical evidence of these histories is now disappearing as well.”

While the gentrification of the Scheunenviertel has slowly eliminated the architectural traces of the neighborhood’s history, even the surviving materials, such as the archival documents, photographs, and Attie’s own work, is problematic. As Hirsch and Spitzer point out, these documents reveal themselves to be “both limited and flawed historical documents, as well as powerful ‘points of memory’ linking past and present, memory and post-memory, individual remembrance and cultural recall.” By dematerializing the photographic object into a projection, Attie bridges the distance between the past history and present reality of the Scheunenviertel in an effort to revitalize memory of that site. Within the ephemeral projections

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72 In “Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Projection and the Site of Urban ‘Revitalization,’” Rosalyn Deutsche notes the observation that structural factors prepare conditions for gentrification in order to “ascertain precisely whose needs and interests regular the restructuring of urban space within which gentrification plays a role.” As she describes, such a theory rests on the premise that the physical form of the cityscape is indivisible from the society in which it develops. The transformation of the Scheunenviertel, then, can be seen as the result of a wholesale reorganization of space due to the restructuring of that society. See Neil Smith and Michele LeFaiure’s “A Class Analysis of Gentrification,” in Gentrification, Displacement and Neighborhood Revitalization, p. 43-63.


74 Hirsch and Spitzer, 171.
of _The Writing on the Wall_, as well as the photographs taken of the installations, Attie examines the space between a site and its past, between its history and our memory of it.\textsuperscript{75} In his installations, the projected photographs made visible the now invisible Jews of Germany who continued to haunt not just these particular sites, but the memory and imagination of people all over the world.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} James E. Young. *At Memory’s Edge*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 89.  
\textsuperscript{76} Michelle A Friedman, 37.
FIGURES

Figure 1: Shimon Attie, Mulackstraße 32, Berlin: Former kosher butcher’s shop, 1930, 1992

Figure 2: Shimon Attie, Mulackstraße 37, Berlin: Former kosher butcher’s shop and laundry, 1930, 1992
Figure 3: Shimon Attie, *Mulackstraße 37, Berlin: Former Jewish Residents 1932, 1992*

Figure 4: Shimon Attie, *Joachimstraße/Ecke Auguststraße, Berlin: Former Jewish Resident, 1931, 1992*
Figure 5: Shimon Attie, *Linienstraße, Berlin: Police raid on former Jewish Residents, 1920, 1992*

Figure 6: Shimon Attie, *Almstadtstraße 43, Berlin: Former Hebrew bookstore, 1930, 1992*
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