

PETER MUIR

The Mourning Play (Trauerspiel) of Shimon Attie

Abstract

Dematerialised, insubstantial and ghostly in their presence, Shimon Attie's artwork *The Writing on the Wall* (1991-1993) consists of images of Berlin's Jewish inhabitants photographed in the 1920s and 1930s, which, transformed into transparencies are superimposed upon the doorways, dark, empty streets, and warehouse walls of the Scheunenviertel district of Berlin as it appears between 1991 and 1993. Attie projects these archival images onto the exact locations where the photographs were originally taken, trying, as it were, to 'rebuild' fragments of an annihilated world on the very site of its own ruins: thus recalling or summoning up its very particular historical catastrophe. An understanding of history is lodged within these sites of memory and its specific characteristics are activated as something becomes present in its passing away, or better, when something lives in its death. Such an understanding imagines history as a form of after-life, an after-life (or after-image) "whose pulses can still be felt in the present." By re-photographing the projections and the architectural and urban space of the Scheunenviertel, Attie makes layered images that carry forward this after-life as critique. This layering, this palimpsest of memory and experience, this relation between historical and cognitive transparency and opacity, speaks of an orphic space that becomes both a site of memorial and an uneasy grave for the living dead. Within this layering or condensation of past and present, time is no longer understood exclusively as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial. When considering these images the words of Walter Benjamin come to mind, "the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search the picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back may discover it." It is the task of this paper to try to bring to the surface this spot or trace of contingency that links the past with the future present (the future's presence) in images from *The Writing on the Wall*.

Zur Person

Dr. Peter Muir was awarded his PhD by John Moores University. He is currently a Research Associate with the Open University. His research focuses around the strategies of the historical avant-garde and their relationship to contemporary art practice.

Related Publications: 'An Act of Erasure' in *Writing and Seeing: Essays in Word & Image*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2006, 'An Intimate and Slender Response to Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*', in *Constructions of Death, Mourning, and Memory* published by the WAPACC, New York, 2006.

Sonntag, 25.11.2007, 16.00 Uhr, Hörsaal