

MEETINGS OF PAST AND PRESENT:  
THE INSTALLATIONS OF MULTIMEDIA ARTISTS  
HANA IVERSON AND MELISSA SHIFF

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Recent site-specific installations incorporating video and digital media by artists Hana Iverson and Melissa Shiff provocatively engage women's roles in relation to Jewish history and traditions, cultural and religious. Utilizing many of the strategies that emerged in installation and performance art during the early 1960s and mid-1970s, these artists create works that are also broadly reflective of the displacements experienced by contemporary Jews. In *View from the Balcony* (2000), Iverson performs a kind of hybrid spiritual-secular healing ritual in and on the traditional sacred space of the Eldridge Street Synagogue on New York's Lower East Side. The work—a "multi-media project about memory"—responds to the wounds suffered during the historical displacements experienced by immigrant Jews, as they are embodied by one of that community's most important surviving communal buildings. In *Postmodern Jewish Wedding* (2006), a video based on the performance Melissa Shiff created around her own wedding in Toronto in 2003, the artist reinvents ritual; in *ARK* (2006), a video sculpture commissioned by the Jewish Museum in Prague, she creates a new form of display for the archive in a narrative work through which objects recount their own history and resonate both in a local Jewish communal context and in a wider Czech national and political one. Iverson's and Shiff's works have in common the idea of rescuing and restoring the empowering and positive aspects of women's difference as expressed in traditional Jewish ritual. In addition, their interests in the relationship of place to cultural memory, and their engagement with new media to evoke the past in light of the present suggest common cause in the aesthetic re-visioning of contemporary Jewish life.

Installation art, as distinct from traditional painting or sculpture, dominates the space it occupies and has a temporal duration as well. It thus envelops the viewer and demands more active participation than a traditional work of art. The genre emerged during the counterculture era, in opposition to the commercialization of contemporary art galleries and the elitism of museums. It sought to break down the barriers between the art work and the viewer, and between art and life.<sup>1</sup> As Alanna Heiss, founder of the alternative space P.S. 1 in Long Island City, observed in 1976:

Most museums and galleries are designed to show masterpieces; objects made and planned elsewhere for exhibition in relatively neutral spaces. But many artists today do not make self-contained masterpieces; do not want to and do not try to. Nor, are they for the most part interested in neutral spaces. Rather, their work includes the space it's in; embraces it, uses it. Viewing space becomes not frame but material.<sup>2</sup>

Recent site-specific installations incorporating video and digital media by artists Hana Iverson and Melissa Shiff occupy or construct spaces that are anything but neutral. Their works provocatively engage women's roles in relation to Jewish history and traditions, cultural and religious. Utilizing many of the strategies that emerged in installation and performance art during the early 1960s and mid-1970s, they invite the viewer's active engagement. Like pioneering installation (or "environment") artists Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg, Shiff's and Iverson's projects engage the external spaces of their specific locations. Using the site as material, these artists create works that are also broadly reflective of the displacements experienced by contemporary Jews. By imaginatively linking multiple personal and cultural memories, as well as temporal and geographic locales, they seek to connect disparate social and national groups, past and present.

In *View from the Balcony* (2000), Iverson performs a kind of hybrid spiritual-secular healing ritual in and on the traditional sacred space of the synagogue building that the installation occupies. The work—a "multi-media project about memory"<sup>3</sup>—responds to the wounds suffered during the historical displacements experienced by Jews of east European descent, and to the scars of those traumas embodied by one of that community's most important surviving communal buildings, the Eldridge Street Synagogue on New York's Lower East Side. Philadelphia-based Iverson is a multi-media artist with

a background in performance, photography and experimental video. *View from the Balcony* suggests a multiplicity of influences, from Mary Lucier's installation *Last Rites (Positano)*, which explored the artist's mother's early life and memories, to works by Krzysztof Wodiczko and Louise Bourgeois. Her work emphasizes the body as a nexus of experience and, in the project examined here, incorporates gestures of reconciliation on both personal and broader cultural levels.

In what Shiff originally called *Louis and Melissa's Huppah in the Sukkah* (now known as *Postmodern Jewish Wedding*), her wedding as a performance artwork, held in 2003 in Toronto where she lives, the artist reinvents ritual, making it newly relevant to the present. In *ARK* (2006), commissioned by the Jewish Museum in Prague, she creates a new form of display for the archive in a narrative work through which objects recount their own history and resonate both in a local Jewish communal context and in a wider Czech national and political one.<sup>4</sup> Shiff is a video, performance and installation artist. Working from a tradition of conceptual art, the medium she employs is determined by its appropriateness to the concept of a particular project. Influenced by the political art of Martha Rosler, Shiff has been committed to utilizing Jewish myths, symbols and rituals in the service of social justice and activism. Her works examined here also focus on issues of cultural memory.

Iverson's and Shiff's works have in common the idea of rescuing and restoring the empowering and positive aspects of women's difference as expressed in traditional Jewish ritual. In addition to their engagement with video, performance and installation art, they acknowledge a range of influences and inspirations. Although there is no direct overlap, these artists' feminist concerns, their interests in the relationship of place to cultural memory, and their engagement with new media to evoke the past in light of the present suggest common cause in the aesthetic re-visioning of contemporary Jewish life and in their quest for social justice.<sup>5</sup>

HANA IVERSON: *VIEW FROM THE BALCONY*

*The Synagogue's Gendered Spaces*

The Eldridge Street Synagogue, a Moorish-Gothic edifice dedicated in 1887 and touted as “the first great house of worship built in America by Jews from Eastern Europe,” has come to stand as a monument to New York City’s once-vibrant Lower East Side Jewish immigrant community.<sup>6</sup> Iverson’s great-grandparents were Orthodox Jews who settled in Hester Street, near the synagogue. Her great-grandmother was from Sweden, and Iverson herself was born in Evanston, Illinois, though she grew up in Toronto. When, as an adult, she came to live in New York, not far from Eldridge Street, she found in the Lower East Side a secular Jewish pilgrimage site that had attracted generations of Jews, at least since the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

Iverson’s site-specific project for the synagogue, *View from the Balcony*, engages the gendered space of the traditional Orthodox synagogue. It opens a dialogue among the diverse experiences that emerge—both literally and metaphorically—from different positions within the building and from outside and in relation to it. As Iverson has described it, in *View from the Balcony* she created a “healing room” in the empty shaft of the collapsed stairwell that had led to the women’s balcony, just inside the synagogue entryway.<sup>8</sup> Her installation consisted of a video of her own hands sewing together two pieces of parchment, projected onto a 40’ white cloth suspended in the shaft and accompanied by a five-and-a-half-minute audio loop. The gesture of hands sewing—a traditional female task—was intended to symbolize the mending of rifts in Jewish life, such as the experience of “female congregants, seated in the balcony . . . separated from the men in the sanctuary below them” and the experience of “immigrants to America separated from their countries and languages of origin.”<sup>9</sup> In the context of this trope of healing, the stairway shaft itself connotes a wound in the body of the synagogue, while the white curtain evokes both healing (a bandage) and separation (a *mehitzah*—the curtain that separates men from women in traditional Orthodox synagogues).

The specific sexual connotations of the wound have gone unremarked but may suggest the shaft as a metaphor for the vulnerability of a woman’s body and a sign of woundedness. Tropes of woundedness (as well as fragmentation, also relevant to Iverson’s work) ally Iverson with Hannah Wilke (1940–1993), one of the most important Jewish feminist artists in the United States, whose

works include *Venus Pareve* (1982–1984), her sculptural self-portrait: a series of diminutive plaster of Paris casts (including one in chocolate) based on her own armless and legless body; and *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974–1975), in which she used chewed gum to form vaginal-shaped sculptures that she stuck to her skin as wounds.<sup>10</sup>

Iverson further articulated the healing metaphor in a blog, in which she expressed her feelings about rifts in her relationship with Jewish tradition and with her parents, particularly her mother, who was seriously ill while Iverson was working on *View from the Balcony*. In this regard, she follows in a tradition of pioneering Jewish feminist artists whose work has been informed by the mother-daughter relationship. For example, as Lisa Bloom has noted, Eleanor Antin's *Domestic Peace* (1971) went against the grain of prevailing feminist doctrine, which posited unproblematic mother-daughter relationships, by framing the conflict in her relationship with her mother in terms that underscore her resistance to her mother's devotion to certain American middle-class values.<sup>11</sup> A further comparison may be made with Wilke's photographic images, such as *So Help Me Hannah: Portrait of the Artist with her Mother, Selma Butter* (1978–81). Wilke—whose work critiques patriarchal representations of the female body through the use of her own body in her art—highlighted the transitory nature of her embodied feminine beauty and youth by comparing her body with that of her mother, who was seriously ill at the time. Photographing her mother also provided a pretense for the two women to spend time together. Similarly, Iverson uses storytelling as a healing strategy in her efforts to lift her mother's spirits. In her Web diary, she writes about her mother's illness, the toll time takes on the body, and the relationship between the two women's bodies. Photographs and video stills inserted into the diary show her mother showering, revealing her wounds from surgery. Iverson's relationship with her mother is evoked in fragments of the soundtrack and written into the private "Visual Diary" that the artist intended to make part of the installation's Web component (see below), and in the "Web Diary" that went online two years into the installation.<sup>12</sup>

The artist's body has played a central role in other contemporary art installations or performances in synagogue spaces. Like Iverson's, such works activate the space, bringing it to life by reconnecting the past to the present through memory. For example, Abe Wald's live performance "The Matzoh Factory" was a personal narrative staged at The Synagogue Space for Visual and Performing Arts in 1996. In "Matzoh Factory," according to Aviva Weintraub,

[T]he moment of performance represents an archaeology of memory. To his personal memory is added a stratum of collective memory by virtue of the location of this performance. Abe's body remembers and recovers his own past (his child body) and his ancestral past (through his parents' bodies). This takes place within the body of a building, The Synagogue Space, which, through its architecture and décor, resonates with its own history. Abe's body, through his presence and his performance, activates the space.<sup>13</sup>

Like Iverson's, Wald's body is a nexus of experience and suggests the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, so influential on an earlier generation of artists. Marcia Tucker's observation regarding the phenomenological aspects of Bruce Nauman's work might apply equally well to Wald's, as well as to Iverson's and Shiff's performance and installation work:

This concern with physical self is not simple artistic egocentrism, but use of the body to transform intimate subjectivity into objective demonstration. Man is the perceiver and the perceived; he acts and is acted upon; he is the sensor and the sensed. His behavior constitutes a dialectical interchange with the world he occupies. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Structure of Behavior*, stresses that man *is*, in fact, his body.<sup>14</sup>

In both installations, as well, the multimedia components (in Wald's, including slide projections), the total environment and the artist's body create a single work, activating the space, with the goal, in Iverson's words, of "retriev[ing] dispersed cultural elements such as language, memory, and artifacts and reconnect[ing] them to their roots" and providing "a context through which these elements can be grasped more deeply."<sup>15</sup>

Yet, Iverson's feminist inflections distinguish her work from Wald's. *View from the Balcony* is structured through her use of and emphasis on the gendered space constructed by the traditional Orthodox synagogue, as well as the pivotal role played by her own body as grafted into the body of the synagogue. Her choice of a marginal site refocuses attention onto a less privileged area, away from the *bimah* where, in Orthodox synagogues, men read from the Torah and women are excluded. By contrast, Wald's performance took place in the "masculine" space of the main sanctuary. Unlike Wald, Iverson draws attention to an "other" site and an "other" kind of collective experience in the

synagogue—that of prayers and social interaction among women in the balcony. While that site can no longer be reached, both because it is in the past and because the stairway to it has collapsed, the artist’s sewing hands evocatively suggest the possibility of repair.

Like The Synagogue Space, the Eldridge Street Synagogue is layered with memories. It, too, has functioned throughout its history “as a stand-in for a piece of the *alte haym* (‘old home,’ meaning Jewish Eastern Europe).”<sup>16</sup> Both Iverson and Wald incorporate this context into their works. As Weintraub suggests, collective memory allows for a conflation of past and present in which the abandoned or neglected synagogue building becomes a symbolic substitute for the fate of similar synagogues in Europe and a reminder of the devastation of Jewish communities there during the Holocaust. Left to rot as Jews from the Lower East Side successfully acculturated and moved away from the neighborhood, the Eldridge Street Synagogue was near abandonment in the 1970s. Yet, as Iverson’s project description maintains:

The Synagogue, with its grand architecture, is a place where the European traditions, threatened in the past century by anti-Semitism and assimilation, still have resonance. In its poignant, mid-restoration condition, the building is also a vivid reminder of the struggle between cultural continuity and change.<sup>17</sup>

In both spaces, the synagogue building becomes an indexical sign of the Holocaust; assimilation and the shadow of the Holocaust are narrative elements that lend shape to the installations.

Over the years, the Eldridge Street Project has sponsored other artist’s installations that evoke the past. *View from the Balcony* was preceded in 1995 by *What they Remember*, an audio installation by Christian Boltanski that occupied the main sanctuary.<sup>18</sup> Boltanski chose Eldridge Street among several sites for his *Lost: New York Projects*. In each site-specific installation, he sought to “evoke a sense of a departed human presence.”<sup>19</sup> The Eldridge Street installation consisted of nine stations where three- to five-minute audio loops played the recorded stories of children “from different ethnic backgrounds . . . telling their own versions of their histories.”<sup>20</sup> While there are similarities, Iverson’s work is set apart from both Wald’s and Boltanski’s by the marginal space it inhabits, in the stairway shaft, and by engaging its setting through the actions, voices and stories of women.

*The Fragment as Trope*

Unlike Wald's live performance, Iverson's installation represents her body only fragmentarily. For Iverson, the fragment has a deep resonance with Auschwitz: The gesture of sewing the parchment, literally skin, enacts the repair of the Jewish body. Her focus on hands and voices as fragments symbolizing women's partial presence distinguishes Iverson's feminist art practice. As she wrote in the "Visual Diary":

The body, often fragmented, sometimes whole, becomes the locus of perception, of identity, of memory. Taking the body's most primary sensations, touch and synesthesia, and their memory-states, I build elements of an autobiography where nature serves as refuge and renewal.

The healing metaphor and the fragment emerged as strategies in her earlier work. As her friend and mentor, Fred Ritchin, had observed, her originality lay in the way she used fragments "to guide the narrative, along with the technology that supports the fragmented structure creating a database of fragments."<sup>21</sup>

The audio loop of *View from the Balcony* also comprises fragments that reclaim women's voices in the synagogue, negating the traditional proscription, in the public space, of *kol ha'ishah*—a woman's voice or, specifically, her singing. The audio includes the woman's daily prayer "Blessed are you, Lord, for making me according to your will" (in contrast, observant men recite: "Blessed are you for not making me a woman"); a woman reciting a strudel recipe in Yiddish; and fragments in English of stories recited by Iverson and other women. All the spoken words are fragmented, weaving in and out to create a kind of song poem.

The women's experiences are communicated through the languages that constitute them: Hebrew, the language of prayer; Yiddish, the language of community; and English, the language of assimilation. The disparate women's voices (mingled with sound effects like the clinking of dishes and a baby crying) are not in conflict, but create a meditative chant, a fluid song evocative of fleeting experiences and memories, expressed through what Iverson has called a "music of voices."<sup>22</sup> The strudel recipe in Yiddish, for example, is broken into fragments ("First you take eggs," then "one ounce sugar," etc.).<sup>23</sup> The chorus—a group of women—chants "Yoy, yoy, yoy," which the artist has



characterized as a lament or commentary. The English includes references to the artist's grandmother, who was born on the Lower East Side and was known for wearing hats. Other fragments come from Iverson's writing and serve to give the work a direction, summed up in the phrase "lightness at the top of the stairs"; while evoking ascent to the balcony, it also describes a memory of her grandmother's house.

Lightness at the top of the stairs . . .  
My mother's mother  
She kissed the book  
Could read tea leaves  
All the secrets  
And her parents and the rest of her family were killed . . .  
A strudel pie . . .  
She understood her mother more each day  
My grandma Malia was the daughter of the grand rabbi in Moldavia  
She came to America  
She used to say let me be in good health . . .  
The rest of her family were killed.  
*Yoy, yoy, yoy*

It was after my grandmother died  
Slipped back into the skin of my grandmother  
The line of our scars actually would join us.  
*Yoy, yoy, yoy*

Here the theme of skin sewn together is an aural reiteration of the visual trope of Iverson's hands sewing parchment and of memory as an embodied experience. As the rift between the generations is repaired, the stitches leave a scar. The audio continues:

The war is over  
Birds were flying over me  
You were born into death.

The fragment "the war is over" came from a dream Iverson had on a visit to Poland. She was in a building in the former Jewish ghetto, "standing on a stairs

looking down, watching two people trying to throw their bodies up from the basement. They had been hiding for 50 years, because no one told them the war was over.” All her work since then has been about “The war is over.”<sup>24</sup>

In the “Visual Diary” that Iverson had planned to include in the Web component of the project, images of ascent, descent and fragmentation came together in a description of the fate of the space shuttle Columbia, which broke up over Texas as it re-entered the Earth’s atmosphere on February 1, 2003. In the artist’s telling, the events of that morning were inseparable from other traumas marking the fissures in communal memory and history, made all the more poignant from a Jewish perspective by the presence on that particular flight of an Israeli astronaut, Ilan Ramon. The space shuttle tragedy and Iverson’s subjective response to it reflect the way in which the everyday, time and memory were integrated into the project.

*“View from the Balcony” on the World Wide Web*

An ambitious Web component that was only partially realized has been a less immediately visible aspect of the project. The “Web Diary” presents the artist’s “view from the balcony,” just as the women’s voices in the soundtrack present their “views” from a series of positions in the communal, sacred and wider worlds of everyday experience. The full Web component was to feature stories, photographs and memories gathered from participants during site-specific events and an educational program held in conjunction with the installation. Two of these events involved older women who lived nearby and local schoolchildren. The Web component embraced the synagogue as “a gathering place and focal point for the neighborhood in both its historic and contemporary context.”<sup>25</sup>

Described as a former “immigrant gateway, home to Irish, Jews, and Italians,” the synagogue’s neighborhood lies “at the intersection of Chinatown and the Lower East Side,” populated by Chinese Latinos and East Asians. The seeming coexistence of old world and new—and what, exactly, constitutes “old” and “new”—is constantly being renegotiated.<sup>26</sup> The Web component sought to engage this shifting identity by presenting stories linking the diverse groups, past and present. It was also to feature women’s stories gathered from Jewish sites in Europe, to “show how narratives ‘travel’ and link historic Jewish places, animating both the site and the locale,” and to “reveal the social

history embedded in the diverse layers of a multi-ethnic community.” Narratives would bring together “groups that by nature tend to segregate along the lines of religious, economic, educational and generational difference.”<sup>27</sup>

The installation’s interactive components and presence on the Web pushed *View from the Balcony* into the public realm, increasing “viewer” participation through a collaborative process that simultaneously expanded its context beyond the synagogue walls, thus responding to Hans Haacke’s concern that “purely visual art is increasingly unable to communicate the complexities of the contemporary world.” Haacke recommended instead “hybrid forms of communication, mixture of many media, including the context in which they are applied as signifiers.” As Lucy Lippard remarked almost two decades later, “[t]he explosion of ‘installation art’ in the interim, and the incorporation of video and digital media, has proved him right.”<sup>28</sup> Iverson’s work collapses genres: video art, installation, performance, photography, new media. By virtue of its site specificity, it seems to fulfill Haacke’s appeal for the context of the work to function as a signifier.

### *The Road Home*

The “Visual Diary” includes an entry entitled *The Road Home*, with a photograph of the artist lying across a road that narrows as it reaches toward the horizon. Imagining herself walking on the road, the artist wrote:

Walking is in a sense the “medium” of my work. It is a way for me to reinhabit the nomadic element of the Jewish diaspora, finding “home” not in a specific place but in the meanings that arise from my search via movement and language.<sup>29</sup>

Iverson’s notion of home is not fixed; it is determined neither by the place she inhabits nor by the prescribed limits to ways of being in the world. Her relationship to place, to the past and therefore to the present is constantly renegotiated. While *View from the Balcony* was still on view, Iverson relocated to upstate New York and then to Philadelphia. Like Irit Rogoff, her sense of belonging depends on “unhomed geographies”<sup>30</sup> shaped by memories and fantasy. Rogoff’s “growing understanding that relations between subjects and places are, in the first instance, refracted through structures and orders

of belonging” offers an important interpretive model. In Iverson’s case, these “structures and orders of belonging” may be the very traditions and customs of her Jewish heritage that the charged space of the synagogue allowed her to engage. As Rogoff has written:

[M]y own displacement entails complex daily negotiations between all the cultures and languages and histories which inhabit me, resulting in the suspension of belief in the possibility of either coherent narratives or sign systems that can actually reflect straightforward relations between subjects, places and identities.<sup>31</sup>

The structure and content of *View from the Balcony* evoke a similar sense of displacement, particularly in their utilization of the fragment.

David Kaufman has observed that “synagogues are the new repositories of Lower East Side memory,” and that “[historical] representation of the immigrant synagogue has shifted between near-exclusion and over-emphasis,” a phenomenon that he relates to broader questions of American Jewish identity:

The era of second-generation American Jewry (roughly 1920–1950) was characterized by the rise of an ethnicity in which group identity was largely based upon the ties of historic peoplehood and common culture, and thus the synagogue understandably receded into the background. The following era (1950–1980) saw the revival of an identity based on religious belief and affiliation (if not necessarily observance), and hence the synagogue became the very symbol of group existence. Today, as in the immigrant era itself, there seems to be greater awareness that Jewishness is a religious and an ethnic identity at once.<sup>32</sup>

In Kaufmann’s opinion, “as long as confusion persists on this point, as long as Jews tend to emphasize one at the expense of the other, then the synagogue will remain on contested ground.” Yet, for visual artists, the synagogue is a rich vessel, one onto which a multiplicity of experiences may be projected. In the synagogue site, one may yet recognize the powers of both the human imagination and the divine, reconcile the past, meet the present, and—to paraphrase Derrida, as Melissa Shiff does in *ARK*—“remember the future.”

*For images of Hana Iverson’s View from the Balcony see p. 57.*

MELISSA SHIFF: *HUPPAH IN THE SUKKAH, ARK*

*Huppah in the Sukkah*

*Louis and Melissa's Huppah in the Sukkah*, the subject of *Avant-Garde Jewish Wedding* (2004) and *Postmodern Jewish Wedding* (2006), is among Melissa Shiff's projects that "rethink, reinvent and reinvigorate Jewish ritual."<sup>33</sup> For her wedding, Shiff and her bridegroom, Louis Kaplan, a professor of photography and new media, "created a ritual that played between contemporary performance art and the customs of the traditional Ashkenazi Jewish wedding."<sup>34</sup> They were married in Toronto on October 12, 2003, during Sukkot, a festival marking the fall harvest, when Jews are enjoined to "dwell" in huts or booths as a symbol of life's frailty and transience and a reminder of how God provided shelter for the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert.

Several aspects of the performance refigured tradition, such as the soundtrack of the *Hip Hop Khasene* by new wave Klezmer musicians Solomon and Socalled, which "crossed hip-hop with Klezmer music, contemporary rap with *badkhones* (traditional Jewish wedding jesting)."<sup>35</sup> In addition to the music, the incorporation and evocation of ritual elements associated with both the wedding ceremony and the holiday of Sukkot firmly root Shiff in the traditions of the Ashkenazi diaspora. In her work, diaspora is connoted in a positive sense as existing across time but not linked to geographic specificity—to a particular, physical home. Home, the artist appears to acknowledge, is a fiction. Thus, she evades nostalgia while celebrating the past and tradition, albeit with a critical edge.<sup>36</sup>

In *Postmodern Jewish Wedding*, the temporary booth (*sukkah*) is combined with the huppah (wedding canopy), creating a multivalent hybrid structure, open on all sides and symbolizing hospitality and the home that the couple will build together. Unlike traditional canopies, this one was tilted at a 45-degree angle and became a movie screen—"a new media huppah."<sup>37</sup> Video projections were screened throughout the ceremony, including images of the "four species"—the *etrog* (citron), palm (*lulav*), myrtle, and willow—that are "waved" in the holiday's daily ritual; a scene from *The Dybbuk* (1937), of Orthodox Jewish men waving the *lulav*; and scenes from another classic Yiddish film, *Ost/West* (1923), with rewritten inter-titles. The new dialogue projected with *Ost/West* captured the cadence of a talmudic debate in Yiddish-accented English while interjecting humor into the artist's challenge to the Jewish convention

of not performing marriages during the holiday. The men, holding *lulavim* and *etrogim*, engage the question of the “Hebrew Marriage Rite”:

What is Right?

So, Shabse, I hear it’s not right to marry on the second day of Succot.

So what’s wrong with having two simchas in one?

Will they get married in a succah?

Shiff subtly pokes fun at the men, who apparently lack authority to interfere with Shiff’s “legal” decisions regarding what is (her self-determined) right (rite).

Shiff’s use of film confuses the boundaries between fiction and reality. Her wedding, though real, is also a performance, like in the films. Shiff was influenced by Jewish feminist philosopher Judith Butler and also by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s notion that “Jewish is as Jewish does.”<sup>38</sup> By appropriating material from old films, she refocuses attention on how Jewish identity is not “natural” or essential, but is constituted through performance. The emphasis on film underlines the constructed nature of Jewish history and memory—the way in which what we know of the past is often mediated through popular culture.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the ceremony, the real-life wedding guests join the projected images of actors dancing the *hora* in scenes from *The Dybbuk*, *Ost/West*, and a third film, Eleanor Antin’s *Man Without A World* (1991), again drawing attention to the mediated nature of one’s relationship to tradition, of the quest to discover and replicate the past. This seems to be the point of Shiff’s appropriation of Antin’s film, in particular. Though purporting to be a “lost” 1926 Soviet-Yiddish *shtetl* melodrama by “acclaimed” director Yevgeny Antinov (Antin’s alter ego), it is entirely staged.

The wedding venue, a nineteenth-century stone distillery featuring heavy timber beams and trusses and Kingston limestone walls, divested the project of the symbolic weight carried by a traditional synagogue and provided the artist with an “an empty shell,” but one that could connote the past. This was the exact converse of the challenge Iverson engaged while creating *View from the Balcony*. Working with a space that was marked neither by gender definitions nor by ritual precedents freed Shiff to reinvent the wedding ceremony, while still acknowledging the validity of a symbolic performance as a necessary means to sanctify a relationship and reaffirm commitment to Jewish tradition. The artist thus also recognized the transformative power of ritual.

*Rituals for Happening People*

The practice of extricating rituals from their traditional contexts has been a key strategy in Shiff's installation and performance work. In her essay "Kicking the Habit: Making Rituals for Happening People," Shiff framed a discussion of her own work in terms of distinctions that Kaprow made between "happenings" and ordinary theater.<sup>40</sup> Kaprow's strategies of chance and impermanence, as embodied by "happenings," became Shiff's model for performance strategies that seek to reinvigorate Jewish ritual. She embraces the irony of trying to pair the seemingly contradictory terms "happening," a one-time event, and "ritual," whose very *raison d'être* is repetition. As Kaprow declared, "A happening cannot be reproduced and the work is over before habits begin to set in." Habit, as Shiff—invoking Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*—reminds us, is a great deadener. "My artistic practice is to resist this deadening by making Jewish rituals for Happening People," she has written. The Distillery, a "happening" spot in Toronto, with its cafes, artist's studios and galleries, was an apt location for this endeavor. According to the artist:

My practice has been to analyze, reformat and reinvent rituals and my strategy has been to denaturalize rituals by moving them out of familiar environments such as the home or synagogue and into the street and gallery. My ambition is truly to kick the habit. For myself rituals are wonderful vehicles that create tribal unity and that create transcendental spaces. However, my work tries to reactivate rituals so that they have the potential to work beyond these usual functions. By making happenings I am creating spaces where the unexpected might occur and that work to re-link Judaism to social justice. In my work I seek to blur the boundaries and binary oppositions between Happening and Ritual to this end and more generally between Performance Art and Ritual.<sup>41</sup>

In *Postmodern Jewish Wedding*, Shiff carefully reinterpreted each of the rituals performed at a traditional Jewish wedding, which consists of an ordered series of actions with symbolic value that define the relationship between the man and woman as well as affirming their spiritual bond and their connection to the larger community.

Customarily, after preparation of the marriage contract, or *ketubah*, the Jewish wedding ceremony begins with the veiling of the bride, the *bedeken*,

performed by the bridegroom. It symbolizes the modesty of the bride, but also his identification of her, and perhaps also the paternal nature of the relationship, in that it symbolizes his promise to clothe and protect her. Under the huppah, the bride walks around the bridegroom seven times, a reference to the creation of the world and a symbol of the wholeness of their union. Although sometimes understood as an act of submission to the bridegroom, it can also be interpreted as the bride's symbolic enactment of building the walls of the couple's new home, and providing shelter for the bridegroom. In *Postmodern Jewish Wedding*, the couple divided the task equally, each circling the other three-and-a-half times as a projection on the huppah of passages from the Song of Songs mirrored their circle. The ceremony traditionally ends with the bridegroom breaking a glass, usually by stomping it with his foot—a reminder of the Temple's destruction even in the midst of great joy.<sup>42</sup> In their ceremony, Shiff and Kaplan used two glasses, one for the bride to break and one for the bridegroom.

Multimedia was indispensable in creating a tension between a real and a virtual space in which the bride and bridegroom were spiritually, emotionally and physically transformed. *Postmodern Jewish Wedding* begins with the processional of the bride and bridegroom—a choreographed performance during which biblical texts were projected onto their bodies, transfiguring them, while marking the body as the nexus of experience, as in Iverson's work. Shiff became "a holographic bride," an effect achieved by a video projected through the folds of her veil (see p. 60). The text was selected from the Torah portion of *Hayei Sarah*, in which Rebecca veiled herself before Isaac (Gen. 24:65). Kaplan became a Torah—"the embodiment of the text"—as random passages were fast forwarded across his body. According to the artist:

We felt that it was important and crucial to integrate the Torah into our processions both as a marker of our Jewish inheritance and our interpellation as Jewish subjects. The goal was to embody this sacred scripture and scroll as a new media form via video projection and our own moving bodies. In this way, the Torah was animated in space and time and transmogrified via video projection.

As Kaplan arrived at the huppah and turned to face the audience, quotations from Edmond Jabès's *Book of Questions* were projected onto the huppah:



The book is my home.  
It/ has/ always/ been the home/ of/ my words.  
Being Jewish/ means therefore/ being/ at the heart/ of an essential/  
interrogation.

As Shiff turned around at the end of the aisle, the words “She took the veil and covered herself” from Gen. 24:65 were projected onto the huppah, according to the artist, “In an effort to challenge this patriarchal age-old tradition I turned around at the end of the aisle and uncovered myself and broke with this custom.”<sup>43</sup>

Shiff underscored the traditional duty to remember (*zakhor*) and honor one’s forebears by projecting portrait photographs of family members onto the huppah.<sup>44</sup> As the couple stood beneath it, their gaze was directed upward to a series of larger-than-life images that hovered above, “watching over our celebration if only for a moment and then receding back into the void.” The moving presentation reinforced understanding of how photographs both mediate and aid personal and communal memory.

In a part of the ceremony she called “Rewriting Deuteronomy,” Shiff incorporated two biblical passages about marriage rites and the control of a woman’s sexuality. According to Shiff:

We feel that it is very important to mark and transform those aspects of our Jewish inheritance that are based on patriarchal rule and the oppression of women. That is why we decided to rewrite this offensive passage in the Bible about marriage rites and the control of woman’s sexuality at our wedding ceremony. Unlike the harsh verdict of Deuteronomy, we decided to cast off the words of patriarchy and injustice with the aid of the software program *Aftereffects* to be left with free-floating signs from which to create poetry. In the end, the new text is incorporated into the Torah symbolically indexing the sacred text as permeable and permutable.<sup>45</sup>

The text appears in Deuteronomy 22:13 and 20–21:

If any man take a wife, and go unto her, and hate her, and say, I took this woman, and when I came near to her, I found no tokens of virginity in her. . . . If this thing was true, there have not been found tokens of virginity in

the damsel: then shall they lead out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die.

Projected on the huppah, the selected text appears quickly, the words following one another as if emerging from the firmament and written onto the screen against a background of fast-moving clouds. Then they come apart—some of the letters, words, and phrases disappearing, flying off the screen altogether, an iconography suggestive of the midrash according to which the letters fly off the broken tablets of the Ten Commandments. Finally, the words that remain are drawn back toward the center, taking a new shape and creating a poem:

this thing was found  
a man a woman.  
tokens  
they lead to the door  
of this house  
in a city of stones.

### *Postmodern Jewish Wedding in Prague*

As part of the events scheduled in conjunction with the Prague Jewish Museum's centennial in 2006, Shiff was invited to exhibit a video edited from footage of the wedding performance. The installation was projected onto a screen on the *bimah* directly in front of the Torah ark in the Spanish Synagogue, one of several synagogue buildings that (along with a cemetery and ceremonial hall) comprise the museum. It formed a pendant to a temporary history exhibition in the museum's Robert Guttmann Gallery, *Mazal Tov—Good Luck: Jewish Wedding Ceremonies Past and Present*. In Prague, the installation functioned in a similar manner to *View from the Balcony* by serving to reanimate the Jewish presence in the synagogue. The synagogue's permanent exhibition presents the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from emancipation to the present, including the period of the Holocaust and the decimation of the Prague Jewish community. It thus expresses a historical scope that heightens an interpretation of *Postmodern Jewish Wedding* as a testament to the preservation and endurance of Jewish cultural and religious traditions.

In addition to the exhibition it contains, the synagogue embodies in its own architecture and history the story of the city's Jews and their relationship to Czech culture, providing further context for Shiff's installation and adding to its poignancy. The Spanish Synagogue was built in a Moorish style in 1868 on the site of the Prague "Old Shul," the oldest Jewish house of prayer in the city. It was closed for over 20 years, until, in 1998, it was restored and reopened by the Jewish Museum. In the first part of the exhibition, on the synagogue's main floor, archival documents, printed books and portraits tell the story of Jews in the Czech lands during the Habsburg Empire, when they were given broad freedoms, achieving full political emancipation in 1867. The exhibition also examines assimilation and its ensuing issues, particularly the rise of anti-Semitism at the end of the nineteenth century, and of Zionism in response. Another section looks at the period of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), when Jewish nationhood was officially recognized by the state. The Holocaust is commemorated with a display of archival documents and photographs from the museum's collections. Material is also offered on Czech Jewry since 1945.

This larger context helps clarify why the museum's administration wanted Shiff's piece, believing that it had "a great potential for becoming a highly effective tool for bridging differences and for increasing the mutual understanding of people from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as various religious and political affiliations." The project was intended to promote intercultural dialogue.<sup>46</sup> By making people aware of social constructions and ethnic stereotypes, it carried a positive social message.<sup>47</sup> While the juxtaposition of the installation with the historical exhibition did not relate directly to the particular immigrant experiences of the couple's ancestors or with the historical conditions under which they lived, Shiff and Kaplan's wedding was proffered as a seemingly "universal" symbol that also reestablished, virtually, the connections between traditions maintained by many Ashkenazi Jews in North America and their roots in the Old World.

### *Shiff's ARK*

Melissa Shiff's *ARK* (*ARCHA* in Czech), inaugurated in September 2006, was also commissioned for the centennial of the Prague Jewish Museum, whose collection of Jewish cultural patrimony is considered the largest in

the Diaspora.<sup>48</sup> *ARK* is a site-specific outdoor video sculpture that in its form references Noah's Ark and comments on the Museum as "a repository of Jewish artifacts that preserves cultural memory." It is further signified by the intentional association of the title with the words "ARCHive/ARCHetype/ARCHitecture."

Shiff's video narrates the history of both the Museum and Prague's Jewish community. Visible from dusk to midnight, it was projected from within an 18' (4.5 m) high sculpture, constructed of an aluminum frame overlaid with sheets of acrylic plexiglass (see p. 61). The installation was sited in a narrow lane adjacent to the Pinkas Synagogue, one of the museum-operated synagogue buildings, where the entrance gates to the Jewish Ghetto once stood. It is now a border zone; Michaela Hájková, the Jewish Museum's curator, has called it a "boundary between the sacred and the profane, the pulsing world of the living (the surrounding streets are overrun by tourists during the warm months) and the dead (the cemetery and the synagogue that since the 1950s has served as a memorial to the Czech Jews who perished in the Holocaust)."<sup>49</sup> *ARK*'s occupation of this liminal space adds to the gravity of the story it tells.

The "video ship," according to the artist,

reflects upon the museum as an ark (as a sanctuary for Jewish cultural and religious treasures) and an archive (that preserves the legacy of Jewish cultural memory) as well as on the function of the museum in general. *ARK* confronts man-made catastrophes such as the Holocaust and natural disasters such the recent floods in Prague (2002) as the powers of the formless that threaten the museological imperative to collect, order, and structure the archive.

The museum functions as Noah's Ark did in the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible)—to salvage and save what might otherwise be destroyed by natural disaster and catastrophe. Therefore *ARK* seemed to be the perfect metaphor for a project about the museum and particularly about this museum that was able to salvage thousands and thousands of objects during the Holocaust.

The imagery projected in *ARK* is wide-ranging, from powerful and easily recognizable symbols to documentary photographs and objects from the museum's extensive collection, which fill it like the animals coming two by two into Noah's Ark. As the ark is deluged by rain and rising waters, the projections follow a narrative tied to a chronology that blends biblical with historical time.

Biblical myth is conflated with concrete political events and upheavals that occurred from 1906 to 2006, while the fate of the objects in the museum's collection is juxtaposed with that of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia.

The narrative begins with the Hebrew letter Alef projected onto the prow of the ark. Its power as an abstract symbol gives it a mystical connotation that is reinforced by its evocation of creation. The next images, of fish swimming—taken from silver spice boxes in the museum's collection—connote the flow of time, referencing the second day of creation and establishing the major trope of the narrative—the biblical Flood. This imagery has significance on multiple levels—in terms of cosmic history; as a metaphor for the destruction and renewal of the Jewish community during the Holocaust; and as a literal allusion to two floods that occurred in Prague, in 1890 and in 2002, the second one damaging the synagogue. The narrative also incorporates the destruction, in a kind of proto-urban renewal project, of Prague's Old Jewish Quarter, Josefov (named for the Habsburg Emperor Josef II). Such undertakings were common in late nineteenth-century Europe, in response to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the massive project had a devastating impact on the poor Jews of Prague who were displaced by it. As the destruction of synagogues during the clearance and rebuilding threatened the cultural heritage of the community, Salomon Hugo Lieben and Augustin Stein undertook to salvage the objects taken from the religious buildings and founded the Prague Jewish Museum as their repository. In 1939, the Holocaust posed a new threat to Jewish ceremonial objects. Ironically, the Nazis, in 1942, established the Central Jewish Museum in Prague to house the objects confiscated from the destroyed Jewish communities and synagogues of Bohemia and Moravia. It was Dr. Stein who proposed this idea, surreptitiously allowing the museum's staff to rescue the threatened objects.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, they were responsible for the preservation of over 100,000 Jewish objects during the Holocaust.

In 1948, the Czech government was toppled by a Communist *coup d'état*, once again threatening the collections. The Museum was nationalized in 1950, and its artifacts were confiscated by the regime. A Holocaust Memorial was inaugurated at the Pinkas Synagogue but was closed down with the widespread uprisings in 1968. These events are commemorated in Shiff's installation with the projection of a red star with a yellow hammer and sickle, and of the common-era and Hebrew dates 1968/5728 on either side of the ark. The "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 led eventually to the return of control of the museum buildings to the Jewish Community, and a new wave of restitution

began in 2000. Throughout the video loop cycle, the graphic manipulation of the images, the amount and rhythm of their movement, and the duration of the projections is varied to evoke the drama and emotion of this historical narrative.

*The Auschwitz Album*

There are few images of people in the video, which runs just under 30 minutes. Four appear in the narrative sequence of the war period. One of these is an undated photograph of a group of women in front of the deportation trains, taken from the Museum's "Auschwitz Album," a collection of photographs from the Holocaust. The women are dressed in ordinary street clothes, their expressions grim. Their ultimate fate and the physical degradation they were to suffer can only be imagined by the viewer. What concerned Shiff here was how this kind of image fit into the narrative she was constructing, which purposely set up "a tension between what was salvaged, and who was destroyed." In the projection, the museum's prewar collection is shown being engulfed by a gathering storm, a symbol of the maelstrom of history. The year is 1939. Spinning dreidls appear as the collection tumbles into chaos, followed by a series of questions in Czech and English:<sup>52</sup>

Who will survive?  
What was salvaged?  
What will survive?

As if in answer, a long passage follows during which objects fill the ark, each accompanied by an inventory card stamped with a yellow-star badge bearing the word *Jude*. The background is a tumultuous storm with lightning charges. Photographs appear of the curators and archivists who saved the confiscated objects, followed by images from the "Aushwitz Album," which show the classification and storage of these objects during the war: groups of Torah crowns, meat grinders, coats, etc. Then come people, who are also classified, the men and women separated from one another. The first of these photographs shows men, most likely Jews, standing on a mountain of belongings, suitcases and duffle bags. The second is a distant view of people in front of train cars; the third image is of the women; and the fourth is another image of men.

Shiff intended to show how “people, like the objects, were subjected to a similar taxonomical method by the Nazis. The women were grouped together as if they were objects, and like the objects they were given numbers.” Each image is visible for only four seconds and then engulfed, as it were, by rising waters, as the people vanish into death. A quote from the prophet Isaiah (10:22) scrolls vertically across the prow: “For although thy people be as the sands of the sea yet a remnant shall be saved,” reinforcing the artist’s objective of creating a tension “between the forces of nature and the forces of man-made catastrophe that kill and the *ARK* which saves.”<sup>53</sup>

The photograph of women that Shiff chose to include departs significantly from the majority of representations of women in visual culture related to the Holocaust. Liberation photographs showing the results of atrocities perpetrated at the most infamous death camps—Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz—generally have dominated such representations (of both men and women). Yet most of the photographs of women are post-liberation images, according to Barbie Zelizer. They typically feature emaciated female survivors comforting one another, or the disfigured corpses of women stripped naked, with only skin pulled over their bones and their breasts and genital areas on full display. Photographs of women appeared widely in the press in the immediate aftermath of liberation, and were intended to tell a universal story of Nazi brutality; women victims became “iconic representations of atrocity.” Representations in which gender was overdetermined (e.g., a photograph of a dead mother and child) heightened the impact of the photos, in that they presented “a kind of warped domesticity.”<sup>54</sup> Most women (and most Jews in general) were visualized in terms of the brutality they suffered, a mode that has had the effect of dissipating their full humanity into a universal victimhood. Shiff, however, intentionally particularized the women:

I chose the image of the women because most likely they were around the same age as I am now. . . . This could as easily have been me who was killed—and I knew that it would be a point of identification with the viewer.<sup>55</sup>

The museum’s mission, highlighted during its year-long centennial celebration, is to create awareness of the unique characteristics of Jewish cultural heritage and of the traditions of Czech Jewry in the context of Czech culture and society, and to bring living Jewish culture into the present day. Shiff’s chosen

images, presenting living Jews, ordinary citizens with whom visitors might be able to identify, are all the more appropriate in this context. The anniversary of the museum was exploited as an opportunity to bring the contemporary Czech public into closer proximity with a mostly historical Jewish presence.<sup>56</sup>

Situating *ARK* on the boundary between life and death, present and past, was not without risk. Because it occupied a site in one of the lands where the Holocaust was perpetrated, the themes of the Holocaust and assimilation are expressed much differently than in Iverson's work. In Prague, the Holocaust is a permanent reminder of the failure of assimilation and the necessity to reinvent Jewish tradition, in the face not only of deadening habit but also of literal destruction. Shiff's *ARK* did not come to rest gently on the shores of Mt. Ararat; it ran aground in Prague, where it was an uncanny reminder of the past. Among the hidden artifacts it exteriorizes is the Holocaust Memorial in the interior of the adjacent Pinkas synagogue, created at the instigation of Hana Volavková, the only one of the war-time curators to survive the war. *ARK* brings the sufferings of the Jews of Prague and Bohemia out of the archive and onto the street.

Another example elaborates the artist's strategy with regard to display. The artist has suggested that *ARK* is ultimately about museology. It overlapped briefly with the museum's "Defying the Beast" exhibition, about the pre-war collection, though no formal dialogue was established between the two. Yet, for Shiff, the dialogue "is about putting into question the notion of display and forms of display." While the museum's historical exhibition offered the audience "the aura of the object," Shiff wanted to create "a new form on which to display the collection . . . to get the audience to think about the overarching ideas of what a collection and archive means." As a projected quotation from W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* informs the viewer, "Objects don't have voices; only the people who owned them can put voice to them, but the archive gives them a voice, a place in history, moving from a private memory of a person to a public memory of a people." The mission of the archive/museum is affirmed by another quotation from Derrida: "The obligation and imperative of the archive is to remember the future." But the form it takes matters. As with Shiff's projects that reinvent ritual, *ARK* embraces "the strategy of defamiliarization and denaturalization"—in order to wake people up.

["Defying the Beast" was a] traditional show . . . inside the hermetically sealed sanctioned space of the Museum whereas *ARK* is on the street, it's unexpected . . . [It brings] the collection out to the public sphere."<sup>57</sup>



*Conclusion*

Both Iverson and Shiff come to their creative work from highly subjective positions as Jewish women whose lives have been shaped by the cultural losses and geographic displacements that link them to a communal history. Iverson's creation of a healing ritual and Shiff's reinvention of the wedding ceremony and the archive suggest that by reclaiming and regenerating old habits one can reanimate the present and re-envision the future. Their use of new media provided the means by which their installations pushed the physical boundaries of synagogue and museum spaces, redefining and reactivating the institutions that have been entrusted with preserving Jewish cultural traditions and identities. This is no small accomplishment, given the tendency of institutions to stifle innovation—one of the critical impetuses behind early installation art. As Julie Reiss has observed:

The character of installation art . . . has continued to be formed in part by the character of the places that it occupies. The spaces where artists show installation art are eclectic, and not always associated with the art world, margin or center.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, Shiff's and Iverson's works reflect not only the viability of Jewish culture as appropriate subject matter for art, but the enduring power of installation art to engage particular lived experiences and to respond to changing situations. This power derives from the installation's challenge to the purity of modernism, a purity that, as we have come to realize, is rooted in the latter's erasure of difference in favor of a seemingly universal formalism.<sup>59</sup>

Shiff and Iverson have created works that engage time and space and are imbued with a complex sense of the relationships between subjects and the spaces and places they inhabit. Technology has made possible the ability of the works considered here to "travel," either actually (as with the reinstallation of *Postmodern Jewish Wedding* in Prague) or virtually (as with the Web component of *View from the Balcony*), in space as well as in time (as with *ARK*'s narrative, extending from biblical times into the future). Installation works like these simultaneously occupy a "site" while eliding a fixed position in place or time, incorporating a kind of nomadism. They are particularly fitting expressions of contemporary diasporic experience and capture the breadth of its inspiration.

Notes

1. My discussion of installation art is indebted to the fine history written by Julie Reiss, my former colleague at the Jewish Museum, New York. See Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
2. Alanna Heiss, *Rooms (P.S. 1)* (Long Island City, NY: Institute for Art and Urban Resources, 1976); cited in Reiss (see above, note 1), p. 126.
3. Hana Iverson, "About the Project," View from the Balcony site ([www.viewfromthe-balcony.org/about.html](http://www.viewfromthe-balcony.org/about.html), accessed September 13, 2006).
4. Shiff's website ([www.melissashiff.com](http://www.melissashiff.com)) provides further information on her works that "rethink, reinvent and reinvigorate Jewish ritual." These include *Gender Cuts: The Jew Under the Knife* (2000), a feminist inquiry into the ritual of circumcision, and *Times Square Seder: Featuring the Matzoh Ball Soup Kitchen* (2002), a multi-media art activist event for the homeless featuring "Elijah Chair" and "Passover Projections." For more on these projects see Heather Diack, "Activating Exodus: The Art of Melissa Shiff," *Afterimage*, 34 (special issue on "Art and Activism," July–October, 2006), pp. 58–82.
5. For a discussion of *tikkun olam*, "repair of the world," as a paradigm for the interpretation of works by Jewish women artists, see Matthew Baigell, "Ruth Weisberg" and "Helene Aylon," in *American Artists, Jewish Images* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 153–185.
6. A National Historic Landmark, Eldridge Street's long-term renovation project is scheduled to be completed in 2007. Meanwhile, under the auspices of the Eldridge Street Project, the synagogue functions as a cultural and educational center serving a diverse neighborhood community.
7. Lisa Bloom has noted that relocation "haunts" many of the artists she included in her recent book, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art* (New York–London: Routledge, 2006), "especially the initial migration of their parents' generation from Eastern Europe or Russia to the United States" (p. 7). See also Iverson's comments and further description of the project in C. Carr, "World of Our Mothers: An Artist Returns to Her Ancestral Synagogue," *The Village Voice*, September 13–19, 2000 ([www.villagevoice.com/news/0037,carr,18120,1.html](http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0037,carr,18120,1.html), accessed October 3, 2006). Christian Boltanski, too, may have been inspired to include Eldridge Street in his *Lost* project because, according to one account, "Boltanski, who is French, thought his violinist uncle, who had emigrated and disappeared, might have worshipped here," Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 43. On the Lower East Side as a pilgrimage site see Beth S. Wenger, "Memory as Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side," *American Jewish History*, 85 (March 1997), pp. 3–27.

8. The term 'healing room' originates in a Brazilian spiritual practice Iverson became familiar with and explored in her master's thesis.
9. Iverson, "About the Project" (above, note 3).
10. On Wilke's work see Thomas H. Kochheiser (ed.) *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989), and Amelia Jones et. al., *Intra-Venus* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995).
11. Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art* (above, note 7), pp. 56–82.
12. Hana Iverson, "Visual Diary" (October 15, 2006), on Blogspot ([hwww.hanaiverson2.blogspot.com](http://hwww.hanaiverson2.blogspot.com), accessed October 16, 2006). Iverson posted selections from the "Visual Diary" to her blog in October 2006, when I began to talk to her about the project.
13. Aviva Weintraub, "Performing Memory: 'The Matzoh Factory' on the Lower East Side," in Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler and Beth S. Wenger (eds.), *Remembering the Lower East Side* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 263–264. The Synagogue Space was a short-lived cultural center housed in a former synagogue on East First Street on the Lower East Side (also called the East Village).
14. Marcia Tucker, "PheNAUMANology," *Artforum*, 9 (December 1970), p. 38. Cited in Reiss, *From Margin to Center* (above, note 1), p. 62.
15. Hana Iverson, "Goals of the Project," View from the Balcony site ([www.viewfromthebalcony.org/goals.html](http://www.viewfromthebalcony.org/goals.html), accessed October 16, 2006).
16. Weintraub, "Performing Memory" (above, note 13), pp. 259–260.
17. Iverson, "About the Project" (above, note 3).
18. Another installation should also be mentioned. In 2004, the Eldridge Street Project commissioned *Gates of Light* by Rose Bond, a 12-minute loop with sound that has been described as a "multi-window digital animation . . . that lies at the intersection of public art and people's history." The animation illuminated the synagogue's windows with a "tri-storied evocation of the history of the National Historic Landmark and its gateway neighborhood" ([www.rosebond.net](http://www.rosebond.net), accessed October 16, 2006).
19. Holland Cotter, "Lost, Found and Somewhere in Between," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1995 (<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE1DB1431F935A15756C0A963958260&sec=&pagewanted=print>, accessed October 10, 2006). Boltanski's installation is also discussed by Lippard (above, note 7), p. 43.
20. The three other components of Boltanski's project included *Dispersions* at the Church of the Intercession in Harlem, where he sold bags of clothes marked with his name for two dollars each; *Lost Property* at Grand Central Terminal, where he arranged 5,000 articles from the Lost and Found on metal shelves; and *Inventory* at the New York Historical Society, where he installed ordinary items in a pseudo-ethnographic display.



Hana Iverson, *View from the Balcony* (2000–2003), video projection on fabric with audio. Installation at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, New York City. Photograph by Elliott Kaufmann © 2000. Work © Hana Iverson 2006. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Hana Iverson, *View from the Balcony* (2000–2003). View from the bottom of the collapsed stairway. Photograph by Elliott Kaufmann © 2000. Work © Hana Iverson 2006. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

21. Hana Iverson, "Web Diary" (January 10, 2003), View from the Balcony site ([www.viewfromthebalcony.org/2003\\_01\\_05\\_vfb\\_archive.html](http://www.viewfromthebalcony.org/2003_01_05_vfb_archive.html), accessed October 16, 2006). In the same entry she described how she had "been working with fragments for some time" and had earlier looked "at the distance between the fragmented body as presented in the healing rooms of Brazil and their corollary to the fragmented body at Auschwitz."
22. Hana Iverson, quoted in Carr, "World of Our Mothers" (above, note 7).
23. Hana Iverson, email message to the author, October 15, 2006.
24. Carr, "World of Our Mothers" (above, note 7).
25. Hana Iverson, "Web Site," View from the Balcony site (<http://www.viewfromthebalcony.org/website.html>, accessed October 16, 2006).
26. In the years since the installation opened at the synagogue, the neighborhood has continued to undergo intense gentrification, placing enormous pressures on these immigrant communities. See also "About," Eldridge Street Synagogue Project site ([www.eldridgestreet.org/about\\_u\\_m.htm](http://www.eldridgestreet.org/about_u_m.htm), accessed September 13, 2006).
27. Iverson, "Web Site" (above, note 25).
28. Hans Haacke, quoted in *The Village Voice*, March 25–31, 1981, cited in Lippard, *The Lure of the Local* (above, note 7), p. 14.
29. Hana Iverson, "Visual Diary" (above, note 12).
30. Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London–New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.
31. Rogoff, *Terra Infirma* (above, note 30), p. 6.
32. David Kaufman, "Constructions of Memory: The Synagogues of the Lower East Side," in Diner et. al., *Remembering* (above, note 13), pp. 133, 135.
33. This phrase is from Melissa Shiff, "About," on her site ([www.melissashiff.com/about.html](http://www.melissashiff.com/about.html), accessed October 6, 2006). According to Shiff, the actual wedding/performance is called *Louis and Melissa's Huppah in the Sukkah*. Two different video versions of the performance were created and given separate titles. For clarity I refer to the piece as *Postmodern Jewish Wedding*, which the artist has said "is the best title overall." Melissa Shiff, email message to the author, October 30, 2006.
34. Melissa Shiff, "Works," on her site ([www.melissashiff.com/worksAVJWedding/index.html](http://www.melissashiff.com/worksAVJWedding/index.html), accessed October 25, 2006).
35. *Melissa Shiff: Reframing Ritual: Postmodern Jewish Wedding* (Prague: Prague Jewish Museum, 2006), p. 8.
36. My understanding of the notion of positive Diaspora comes from Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *The Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), especially the Introduction, pp. 1–33.
37. Shiff, "Works" (above, note 34).
38. Melissa Shiff, email message to the author, January 28, 2007.

39. For an important study of how mediated knowledge of the past has shaped the work of artists born after World War II, particularly in terms of memory of the Holocaust, see James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2000).
40. Melissa Shiff, “Kicking the Habit: Making Rituals for Happening People,” paper presented at a roundtable on Jewish ritual and performance in connection with “ReJew-venation: The Futures of Jewish Culture,” organized by Louis Kaplan, October 2005. My thanks to Melissa Shiff for providing me with a copy of her paper.
41. Shiff, “Kicking the Habit” (above, note 40).
42. Some details about the traditional Jewish wedding are drawn from “Guide to the Jewish Wedding,” on the Aish HaTorah site ([www.aish.com/literacy/lifecycle/Guide\\_to\\_the\\_Jewish\\_Wedding.asp](http://www.aish.com/literacy/lifecycle/Guide_to_the_Jewish_Wedding.asp), accessed October 16, 2006).
43. Melissa Shiff, “Bride’s Procession,” on her site ([www.melissashiff.com/works/AVJWedding/KaleBridesProcession.html](http://www.melissashiff.com/works/AVJWedding/KaleBridesProcession.html), accessed October 16, 2006).
44. Eadem, “Avant Garde Jewish Wedding,” on her site ([www.melissashiff.com/works/AVJWedding/index.html](http://www.melissashiff.com/works/AVJWedding/index.html), accessed October 16, 2006).
45. Eadem, “Rewriting Deuteronomy,” on her site ([www.melissashiff.com/works/AVJWedding/RewritingDeuteronomy.html](http://www.melissashiff.com/works/AVJWedding/RewritingDeuteronomy.html), accessed October 16, 2006).
46. Michaela Hájková, fundraising letter addressed to Patrons of the Jewish Arts, January 24, 2006 ([www.melissashiff.com/events/img/MishaLetter1.gif](http://www.melissashiff.com/events/img/MishaLetter1.gif), accessed October 15, 2006).
47. Leo Pavlát, Director of the Prague Jewish Museum, letter addressed to Patrons of Jewish Arts, January 24, 2006 ([www.melissashiff.com/events/img/DrPavlatLetter1.gif](http://www.melissashiff.com/events/img/DrPavlatLetter1.gif), accessed October 15, 2006).
48. The work was on view in Prague through January 14, 2007. It is scheduled to be re-installed in the new Jewish Museum in Munich in November 2007.
49. Michaela Hájková, “ARK: ARCHive/ARCHetype/ARCHitecture,” in the exhibition brochure *Melissa Shiff: ARK/ARCHA, September 13, 2006–January 14, 2007* (Prague: Jewish Museum, 2006), unpaginated.
50. See Cathleen M. Giustino, *Tearing Down Prague’s Jewish Town: Ghetto-Clearance and the Legacy of Middle-Class Ethnic Politics Around 1900* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2004).
51. *Prague Jewish Museum Web Site* ([www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/amuseum.htm](http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/amuseum.htm), accessed October 16, 2006).
52. Melissa Shiff, email message to author, October 25, 2006.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Barbie Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity: Women in Holocaust Photographs,” in eadem (ed.), *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 257.





Melissa Shiff, *ARK*, 2006, video sculpture, installation at The Jewish Museum in Prague. Photograph by Robert Portel. © Melissa Shiff 2006. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

**(Left):** Melissa Shiff, *Postmodern Jewish Wedding*, 2006, video still. Photograph by Carolyn Wong. © Melissa Shiff 2006. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



*Susan Chevlowe*

55. Shiff, email message (above, note 52).

56. Prague Jewish Museum site ([www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/a100let.htm](http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/a100let.htm), accessed October 12, 2006).

57. Shiff, email message (above, note 52).

58. Reiss, *From Margin to Center* (above, note 1), p. 157.

59. On installation as a challenge to modernism, see Reiss's comments on Michael Fried's well-known 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," a critique of minimalism, in Reiss, *From Margin to Center* (above, note 1), p. xiii–xiv. On modernist formalism and the erasure of difference, see Bloom, *Jewish Identities* (above, note 7), chapter one.

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