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Melissa Shiff's *Ark/Archa*

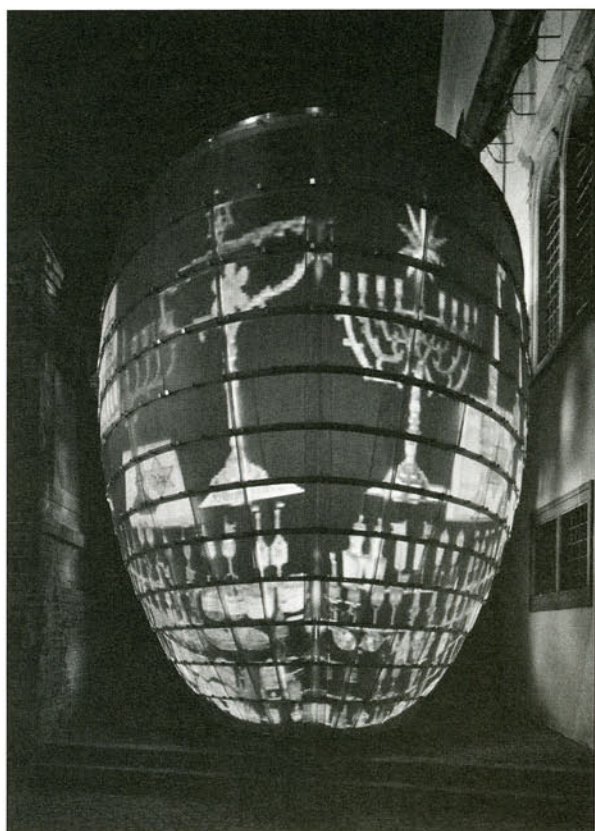
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Reviewed by Bruce Jenkins (*bjenki@saic.edu*), dean of undergraduate studies, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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Commissioned by the Jewish Museum in Prague this past year in celebration of the centennial of its founding, *Ark/Archa* is a site-specific video installation by the Canadian media artist Melissa Shiff. As its title suggests, the piece is shaped in the form of an ark, but it is fabricated out of translucent material so that it functions both as a sculptural form by day and, as the artist describes it, "a massive three-dimensional movie screen" by night. During its presentation in Prague, *Ark/Archa* was installed in the former Jewish ghetto—in an alleyway between the Old Jewish Cemetery, with its vertical layers of listing gravestones, and the historic Pinkas Synagogue, which dates back to the sixteenth century and, since the 1950s, has served as a memorial to the nearly 80,000 Holocaust victims from Moravia and Bohemia whose names are inscribed on its bare walls.

Shiff's installation opened in mid-September 2006 shortly before the Jewish New Year (5767) and closed in mid-January. Earlier in the spring, the museum had installed *Postmodern Jewish Wedding* (2004), a collaborative work by the artist and her partner Louis Kaplan, as a projection piece shown daily on a screen placed above

the altar of the gilded Spanish Synagogue. *Ark/Archa* also travels to the Jewish Museum in Munich and is on view there November 18, 2007 to March 30, 2008.

At the core of *Ark/Archa* is a bit of revealing wordplay that deftly negotiates between the figure of the ark and the role of the archive. Shiff locates in the Biblical reference to Noah's Ark a symbolic composite: both a vessel capable of surviving an epic flood, and a floating archive whose bestiary cargo was to serve as the source of survival for all the earth's fauna. The ark also has particular resonance with the Prague site, which has witnessed repeated flooding that dates



back to the mid-eighteenth century and includes the devastating floods of August 2002. This was the operative metaphor for the artist; it provides both an insight into one of the fundamental purposes of the museum—"to salvage and save precious objects that might otherwise be destroyed by natural disasters or human catastrophe"—and the resonant form in which to journey back through a traumatic century.

The work that is projected onto the grid-dered screen-prow of Shiff's ark is a 30-minute tape that condenses not only the century of the museum's existence but equally the millennial history of Jewish life in the Czech lands and the four millennia that separated the launch of the biblical ark from that of Shiff's virtual one. The piece opens with the Hebrew letter aleph, sym-

bolizing both the foundation of language and the genesis of the world. As Shiff describes it, the letters are replaced by numbers, "the first theme of the video—numbers that serve as the basis of any archival system." Water imagery appears, and we are in the early days of the Judeo-Christian creation myth. With numbers referencing historical dates (1056 for the Biblical flood, 5666 for the founding of the museum) and suggestive of a Kabalistic numerology, black-and-white imagery chronicles the destruction of the Jewish quarter of Josefov in the mid-1890s and frames the museum's founding with the query, "What was salvaged?" From the ashes of Josefov emerged the sacred objects and artifacts from daily life that would initiate the collection of the Jewish Museum.

The longest segment of this history focuses on the late 1930s and early 1940s, when any sense of affirmation about the survival of this culture was offset by the knowledge that the influx of these artifacts stemmed in large measure from the demise of their owners and the synagogues in which they were originally housed. *Ark/Archa* in this way resembles what the French artist Christian Boltanski—speaking about Chantal Akerman's *D'Est* (1993), a personal moving-image journey through Eastern Europe following the end of the Soviet Union—called a "ghost story." The spectral character of Shiff's projections, coupled with the footage and photographs of people and places that survive only as images, capture perfectly the tragic aspect of this historical chronicle. All that endures are the symbols of faith left behind, and in particular the Star of David, whose transformations—

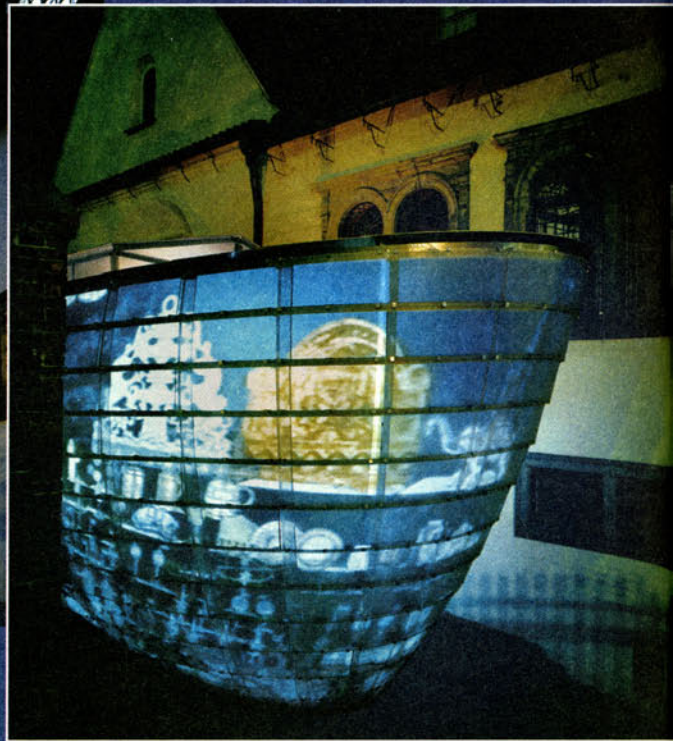
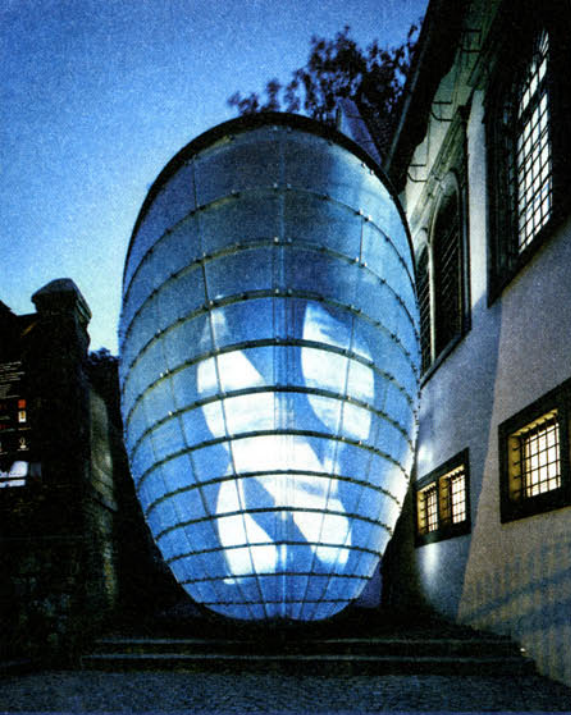


from a wrought-iron star salvaged from a synagogue to the yellow star of the Nazi era inscribed with "Jude" to the red star of Communist rule—become markers of the shifting fate of its people.

Much as *Ark/Archa* serves as a vessel both for containing and displaying the artifactual history of a people, its form suggests another aspect of its impulse to preserve. It is here that Shiff initiates another ghost story of sorts in the tale of visionary artists and filmmakers who, as part of a history that is co-terminous with that of the Jewish Museum, attempted to engage the moving-image medium as a resolutely contemporary art form. Careful viewing yields traces of these artists and their practices: the great Soviet film theorist and director Sergei Eisenstein, whose "polyphonic montage" imbued emotional resonance to non-emotional material; his compatriot Mikhail Kaufman (known by the poetic nom de plume Dziga Vertov), whose "kino-eye" techniques captured the complexities of daily life that escaped the human eye; and Esther Shub, who pioneered the making of films from archival footage. There are moments when Shiff's handling of graphic elements (numerals, geometric shapes and figures) evokes the work of a

film artist like Oskar Fischinger, whose animated pieces aspired to create a universal language consonant with both human knowledge and spiritual enlightenment.

All of these artistic voices, and many others, would be silenced by the very events that brought the near destruction of Jewry in the Czech lands. Shiff's visual repository accords them a place alongside that of the objects of veneration and implements of daily use. In so doing, she joins a handful of media artists, including Bill Viola and Mary Lucier, Beryl Korot and Chantal Akerman, who have placed this contemporary form of the moving-image arts in the service of probing the past—creating time machines that transport us into historic sites, sacred spaces, and arenas that challenge the limits of sacrifice and faith. These works seem to channel some of the artistic character of the prewar era while providing secular access to sacred spaces, creating what art historian Margaret Olin would term "a dispassionate, inclusive ground that allows interchange between groups." It is this forward-looking vision that opens up the hidden workings of the archive to a broader community and imagines a second century of preservation and engagement for the museum.



MEDIA: *Ark/Archa*, installed at the Pinkas Synagogue, Prague. Artist Melissa Shiff created a 30-minute video loop memorializing former residents of the adjacent ghetto. The projection illuminates the translucent skin of the vessel. Photos courtesy of the artist, from <http://www.melissashiff.com/works/index.html>.

