

## ARK: ARCHive | ARCHetype | ARCHitecture

Michaela Hájková

Arkhé: The commencement and the commandment. Where authority and social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given.

— Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

The **ARK** project by Canadian multi-media artist Melissa Shiff was specially created for Prague and for the centennial of one of its most important cultural institutions, the Jewish Museum, which this year is celebrating its centennial. From the outset **ARK** was conceived as a video-sculpture to be located in the space of the former Small Pinkas Street, today a nearly forgotten lane — a no-go zone for the usual passerby that lies on the dividing line between cultures and eras.

A blind alley off of Josefov Avenue (today's Široká Street) running along the western face of the Pinkas Synagogue to the Old Jewish Cemetery, Small Pinkas Street stopped serving its function right at the time the Jewish Museum in Prague (or to give its exact title of the day: The Association for Founding and Maintaining a Jewish Museum in Prague) was in its first year of existence. The residential buildings that lined both sides of the street near to Josefov Avenue were torn down in 1906-1907, and of the original landmarks, only the Pinkas Synagogue and the cemetery huddled in the shadow of the newly built Museum of Decorative Arts remained. Entrance gates to the Jewish Ghetto once stood at the top of the street, but over time the street lost its relevance and along with the entire area around the Pinkas Synagogue gradually found itself below the level of the neighboring streets. Though the street is now less than half its former length, there is a special atmosphere here, the kind that all borderlines have hidden within them. This is what makes the space truly unique: it forms a boundary between the sacred and the profane, the pulsating 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).

It is here Melissa Shiff has chosen to place her **ARK**, an object in the form of a ship's prow reaching nearly five meters in height whose prototype is Noah's Ark. Yet unlike the biblical vessel, Shiff's **ARK** is primarily meant to serve as metaphor for the Jewish Museum in Prague, which she sees as an **ark/archive** that has managed to preserve (**archive**) the precious legacy of a thousand years of Jewish culture in the Czech lands despite all the misunderstandings, calamities of nature, and injustices the Jewish community and its members have had to endure.

Even so, **ARK** does not just narrate the story of one institution and one people, and it is not intended to be solely an historical parable. The story it tells has meaning for our lives today. The primary **architecture** of our sense of order and responsibility toward others, a metaphor for our sense of community, the ark is one of the basic **archetypes** sailing across cultures, defining the structure and content of our memory. It is not a ship with sails and rudder that we can steer however we like; it is the biblical *teva* (the Hebrew word in the Torah used for both Noah's Ark and the basket of bulrushes in which Moses was set adrift in the Nile). Flood myths and salvation from floods are found in most ancient cultures: the Sumerian Ziusudra, the Akkadian Atrahasis Epic, the wise king Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the story of Prometheus' son Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha, who saved themselves from the deluge in a giant chest. According to biblical tradition, Noah, who precisely followed the instructions of the Creator in building the ark so that life on earth would not perish, is the patriarch of all humankind (Gen. 6-9). What these various myths teach us, then, is that we all come from the generation of the Flood, and we should therefore realize that whether we like it or not we are all in the same boat. We forget this at times and it often takes a catastrophe to remind us where we have come from and what unites us. Such reminder was the last major flood in Prague in 2002. The water washed away all differences and the city, though brought to its knees by the elements unleashed, was transformed for a while into a single, functioning community. Melissa Shiff's **ARK** also tells of this experience.



## Centennial ARK: The Art of Making a Video Ship

Melissa Shiff

Objects don't have voices only the people who used them can put voice to them but the archive gives them a voice, a place in history. Moving from a private history of a person to a public memory of a people

— W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

### INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT

I thank the Jewish Museum in Prague for inviting me to create a new piece in celebration of their centennial. As a Canadian artist living in the Jewish diaspora it is a great honour to have been chosen to make a project to commemorate the 100th anniversary of this museum. For this momentous occasion I conceived of making **ARK**. My **ARK** is a metaphor for the museum as **ark** and **archive**. It is a video sculpture that comments on the museum as being a repository of objects that preserves cultural memory (or, as W.G. Sebald writes, the "public memory of a people").

The **archival** project in general involves a feverish desire to salvage, to save, to escape oblivion, and to ward away the relentless force of the formless. There are always threats to the **archive** and its ordered formation — the threat of war and the threat of natural disasters. And in the case of the Jewish Museum in Prague in the past 100 years this has been no exception. This museum's collection was in large part amassed as a result of the Holocaust. To paraphrase one of the war time Jewish curators Hana Volavková, dead objects became numbers in the same way as the living beings that used to own them. In a mass salvage campaign, these Jewish scholars saved thousands of ritual objects once used in synagogues and Jewish homes. They **archived** them and kept them from being destroyed escaping the fate of their owners and synagogues in which they were originally housed. Therefore, the Jewish Museum became an **archive**, and an **ark** in the sense of a sanctuary.

**ARK** began a year ago with a "eureka" moment. When Michaela Hájková, curator of visual art at the JMP, invited me to make a new piece for the museum's centennial, I began the creative process by searching for an appropriate metaphor. I suddenly thought of the flood that overtook Prague in 2002 and then it occurred to me that the museum functions much like Noah's Ark in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, given that one of the functions of the museum is to salvage and save precious objects that might otherwise be destroyed by natural disaster or human catastrophe. **ARK** became the perfect metaphor for a project about the museum and particularly about this museum that was able to save so many objects amid the destruction of European Jewry.

**ARK** is a sculpture by day and it comes alive as a video installation by night. Two video projectors are housed inside the sculpture itself and these two projections fill the surface of the **ARK**. Therefore, the sculpture itself is a massive three dimensional movie screen on which my thirty-minute video recounts the story of the Prague Jewish Museum evolving in a context of various mythic and historic events. But **ARK** is not merely a telling of a story, it is also meta-commentary about the archive itself and the desire to archive, to sort and to put things into order. That is why there are passages in my video that depict cataloguing whereby the **ARK** becomes filled and filed with newly acquired objects and their cards, in order to construct the architecture of the ship itself. Therefore the archive becomes the structure of the **ARK** literally and figuratively.

### Creating ARK

The project was conceived as a video sculpture but its scale demanded a great degree of design and engineering. In order to achieve this, I hired and collaborated with the architectural collective Team Project headed by Barry Isenor. The **ARK'S** form followed from its idea. Similar to the way the rear projection comes from the inside to the surface, the project moves the **archive** from the inside of the museum's hermetic interior to the outside where it is viewed from the street.

For the video image to be visible, the structure of the ark had to be as transparent as possible. The ribs of the ship were made of clear acrylic allowing the image to pass through the structure and to be visible on the matte acrylic cladding/screen. However, the structure doesn't disappear entirely - the strapping that holds the ribs in place is silhouetted against the image. This internal architecture acts to form a visible grid that both reorders the **archive** and contains the image.

The viewer is able to see the internal **architecture** of the ship such as the ribs and the strapping and these elements become integrated into the projection producing a three dimensional viewing experience.

The **ark** as a vessel offers the opportunity of transport. In this way it proposes to journey to other ports in the Jewish diaspora and in Israel. This particular **ARK** is a wayfarer that can bring the collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague to any destination in the world. Paradoxically, this mobile **ARK** (like the Biblical **Ark of the Covenant**) works in contrast to the traditional **archive** that is housed in a permanent structure.

### The Video Narrative

I was fortunate to research deep into the museum's storage facilities in order to video tape the treasures that would later be edited into the narrative of the movie and I was given access to hundreds of photographs of the collection that I cut out in Photoshop in order to animate them with the software program After Effects.

The video itself begins with the *aleph*, that first letter that signifies the beginning and mystery of creation. The Hebrew letters morph into their equivalent numbers and this begins the first theme of the video — numbers that serve as the basis of any archival system. These numbers count rapidly while mythic events unfold. Fish swim across the horizontal plane of the **ARK** to denote the flow of time. But these are not ordinary fish, they are in fact part of the museum's collection and are actually spice boxes. The dates count on and the year reaches 1906 and 5666 in the Hebrew calendar. We see the figures of the museum founders Salomon Hugo Lieben and Augustin Stein and an image of a wrought iron grill appears in the middle of which there is a Star of David with the hat inside that all Jews were obliged to wear during Medieval times. This serves as the symbol of the Jewish Community in Prague. The Jewish Museum in Prague is inaugurated. As the dates keep counting, a procession of objects along with their accompanying catalogue cards and accession numbers begin to fill the ship in this sunny period of history.

As the clock counts away toward 1939, the weather begins to change from blue skies and calm serene waters to stormy skies and rough water. Suddenly the prewar objects go asunder and are blown by the winds of a storm. The **archive** is threatened but the objects begin to settle. The words "Central Jewish Museum" appear over a wall of typewriters spooling away furiously. This signifies the beginning of the salvage effort



that was spearheaded by a group of Prague Jewish scholars who made it their mandate to save the precious objects from the destroyed synagogues in Moravia and Bohemia. The wrought iron Jewish star is replaced with the word "Jude" and the yellow star of indignity that the Jews had to wear during the Nazi period. Objects begin to fill the ship at an accelerated pace and pour down with rains from above. The entire ARK fills with hundreds and hundreds of ritual objects, paintings and artifacts. This procession comes to a halt and the overarching commentary on the museum as ark and archive now becomes evident.

The history of the museum continues to unfold as the dates continue to count. The period of Communism takes its toll. The hammer and sickle swoops down stealing away part of the museum's collection. These objects are stolen from the museum only to be restituted to its collections on the cusp of the new millennium. The Communist red star is again

replaced by the wrought iron star as a sign that the Jewish Museum has been returned to the control of the Jewish community. Finally the date comes to 2002 and a flood threatens the museum's collection bringing us back to the constant chaotic threat to the archive and the museum's objectives. This is a final instance where my video creates a tension between the form and structure of ARK as archive and the unpredictability of the ebbs and flows of history that leave disasters in its wake.

The final quote from the late Jacques Derrida reverses the normal direction of time by which we normally think about the archive: "The obligation and imperative of the archive is to remember the future".



# MELISSA SHIFF: ARK | ARCHA

## September 13, 2006 – January 14, 2007

Jewish Museum in Prague - the former Small Pinkas Street  
(at the intersection of Široká and Valentinská by the Pinkas Synagogue)



**Artist:** Melissa Shiff  
**Curator:** Michaela Hájková  
**Consultant:** Louis Kaplan  
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**Engineers:** Blackwell Bowick Partnership  
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**Technical support:** Viktor Vrbický  
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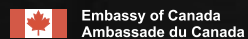
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## About the Artist

ARK is Melissa Shiff's second project created for the Year of Jewish Culture that celebrates the centennial of the Jewish Museum in Prague. Her first project *Reframing Ritual: Postmodern Jewish Wedding* was installed in the Spanish Synagogue from April to June 2006 (a richly illustrated catalogue is available at [www.jewishmuseum.cz](http://www.jewishmuseum.cz)).

Melissa Shiff works in video, performance, installation, and activism. Some of her works aim to revitalize the connection of social justice to Judaism by reformatting and rejuvenating Jewish customs and traditions.

Shiff's video sculpture *Elijah Chair* is in the permanent collection of the Jewish Museum in New York and it was featured in a special exhibition at its Goodkind Media Gallery in 2004 curated by Andrew Ingall. The Elijah Chair was originally part of Shiff's *Times Square Seder Featuring the Matzo Ball Soup Kitchen* held in March of 2002. This art activist happening activated Passover rituals to call attention to the problems of hunger and homelessness. A more recent Passover installation entitled *The Medium is the Matzo* took place at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Life at New York University in April 2005. In October 2005 another of Shiff's works *Gender Cuts / The Jew Under the Knife* was exhibited in the group show *ReJewvenation* conference and cultural festival at the University of Toronto ([www.rejewvenation2005.com](http://www.rejewvenation2005.com)). Shiff's art and activism projects are showcased in the September 2006 issue of the American media arts journal *Afterimage*.

Shiff is a member of the advisory board of Mosaica, a web site for new Jewish art on-line at [www.mosaica.ca](http://www.mosaica.ca), where a web-based version of her film *Looking for Ararat* (in collaboration with Louis Kaplan) can be found. She has also done on-line projects for Modiya, the New York University media website at [www.modiya.nyu.edu/modiya/](http://www.modiya.nyu.edu/modiya/). Having received her artistic training at The School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, she holds a degree from Tufts University and has lectured widely about her art at such institutions as New York University, Brandeis University, and The Jewish Museum in New York.

Shiff has recently launched an on-line store called JAP (Jewish Art Projects/Products/Politics) for her reinvented ritual objects. The store can be reached through her website at [www.melissashiff.com](http://www.melissashiff.com) or directly at [www.japshopper.com](http://www.japshopper.com).

