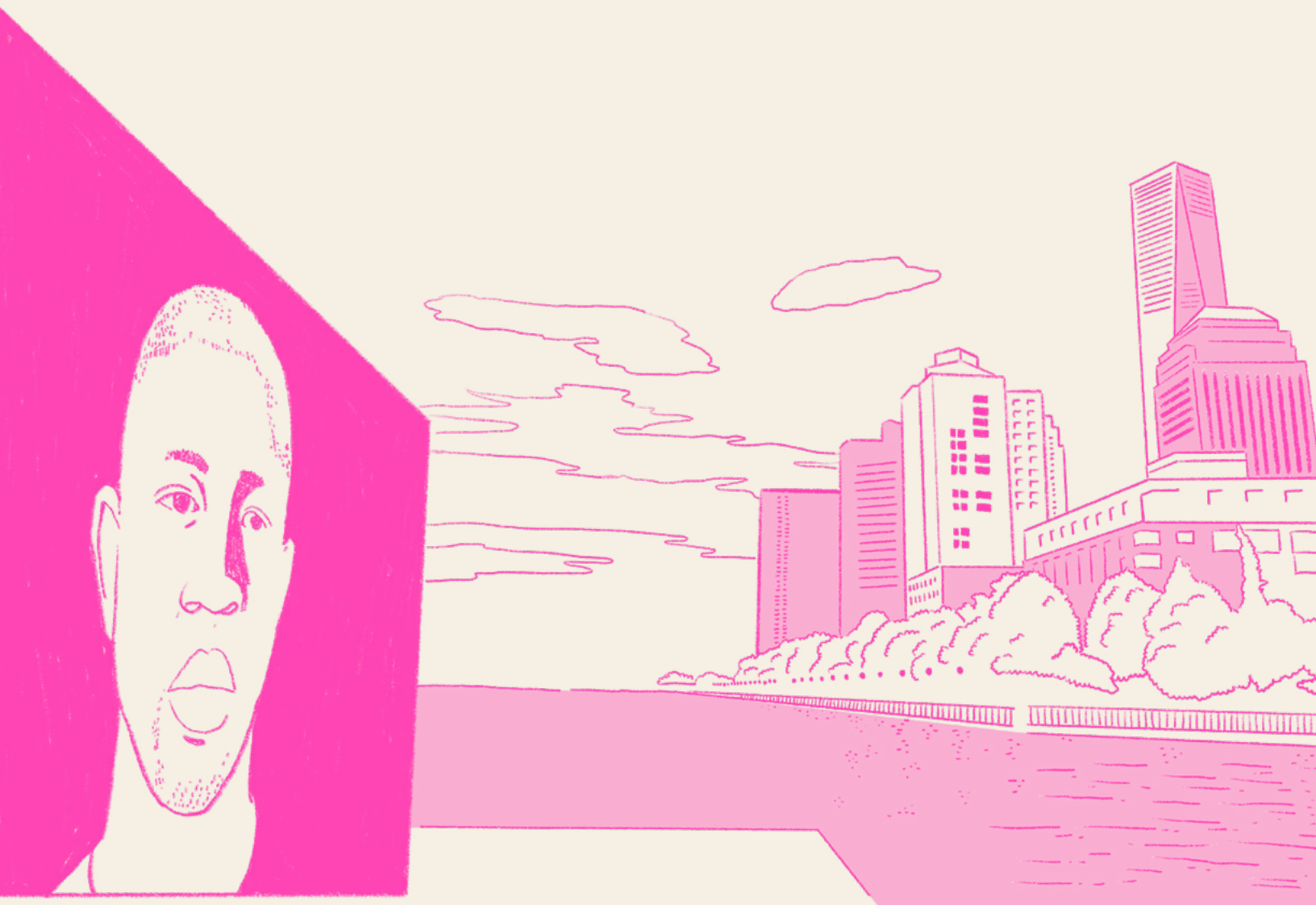


On Recuperating Traumatized Communities: a Conversation on *Shimon Attie's* Curative Installations

by Gordon Fung




Immersive installation offers an experiential complexity that expands the viewers' multi-sensory perceptions. Installation artist Shimon Attie's multimedia and site-specific works go beyond such expectations. His former training in photography and psychotherapy has largely informed his artistic practice. Attie curates sanative multimedia works that invigorate a once desperate community to stand up in the face of trauma with dignity.

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Attie's early work *The Writing on the Wall* (1991) was a slide projection work displayed in East Berlin city. He projected archival images taken in the '30s of the Jewish communities who lived in the same neighborhood onto the buildings. The modern street, where the communities were once uprooted under xenophobic policies, was then reanimated and re-contextualized. Besides its immersive nature, the projection was also an intervention into the modern Berlin cityscape, which confronted the viewers with reimagining and transcending the historical complications encountered by the Jewish diaspora.



***Installation view of
The Writing on the Wall (1991-2)***



The projections were displayed by Kodak carousel projectors. Though the equipment and photos appeared vintage to modern eyes, the result was stunning compared to contemporary large-scale mapping projections on buildings. The otherworldly juxtaposition of archival images with the modern cityscape created a clashing dialogue that went beyond any conventional discourse. This project inspired Attie to see the distinction between displaying a photograph in a museum context versus projecting it as an installation in a site-specific context. This early work of Attie's becomes the turning point to hone his photographic skill for use in the realm of installation.

Continuing with his restorative lens, Attie orchestrated *The Attraction of Onlookers: Aberfan – An Anatomy of a Welsh Village* (2006)—a five-channel video installation. In 1966, the village of Aberfan in Wales encountered a disastrous landslide of mining waste. The incident buried the only primary school in town, claiming the lives of 116 children—almost an entire young generation, alongside 28 adults. The disaster, unfortunately, did not stop there. The mass media and public eye largely invaded victims' privacy. Alongside the non-stop broadcasting of the already devastated landscape, the archives and documentaries keep haunting the survivors into the present, leaving them no room to contemplate their grief and losses. To mitigate such wrongful practice, Attie accepted the invitation by the Arts Council of Wales and the BBC—on marking the 40th anniversary of the event—to turn the treatment of the tragedy in Aberfan around.

This video installation work filmed the Aberfan survivors without featuring any archival image of the ruins. To Attie, the most urgent quest in this commission was to prompt the question, “What does it take to make a Welsh village?” Through careful staging, he filmed the villagers in a statuary pose on a revolving stage. Each with dressings that reflect their occupations and roles, presenting the community rebuilt. The village was hence revitalized, contrary to the public understanding of them being forever victims. The projections of these films were to be displayed as large as possible, as suggested to be projected as 9 feet tall and 16 feet wide for each screen, spanning around 85 feet in total. Such amplified scale, alongside the statuary pose, was highlighting the superbness and heroic quality of the survivors. The frozen gaze and plain emotion of the cast were not unlike how outsiders view the traumatized community, who were not able to move on in the public eyes. Yet the quivering subtleties on the cast’s bodies and faces reflected every little force of life that keeps everyone animated.



Installation view of The Attraction of Onlookers (2006–7)

Continuing to explore the roles between victims and viewers, Attie created *Nightwatch* (2018). This was a floating media installation that utilized the site-specific element of New York rivers. It was first realized on the Hudson and East Rivers in New York City. Attie orchestrated the 20-foot wide LED screen to slowly drift around the rivers, against the signature New York cityscape. Featuring New York residents of international backgrounds, the twelve cast members, including unaccompanied minors, were largely of LGBTQ communities who sought political asylum in New York. Due to their sexual preferences, they had to flee their homelands from invidious oppression, violence, and prosecution. Be-

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coming neighbors in this new sanctuary, they were living storytellers of their struggles between life and death.



Night Watch (Norris with Liberty), Hudson River, 30" x 45" H/48" x 72", Lamda Photograph, Barge, Tugboat, 20' wide hi-res LED screen, ©Shimon Attie, 2018


As informed by his knowledge in photography and cinematography, Attie paid extra attention to the lighting in this work. The contrast reminded Caravaggio's, a famous Italian Baroque painter, dramatic use of *chiaroscuro*. Such drama highlighted the surviving tales of the refugees. Though these stories were told silently on-screen, and yet the unspoken words urgently demanded equality. The installation overlapped with the UN General Assembly Week and was on display for eight consecutive nights.

This was a statement to alert the world and American leaders to take a closer look at the well-being of vulnerable LGBTQ communities. This acclaimed work was recently re-programmed and co-presented by BOXBLUR and Immersive Arts Alliance in the San Francisco Bay on September 17-19 in 2021.

Attie's works are often characterized by frozen gazes from the cast, which poses a question of "Who is watching whom?" The general public often puts victims under the spotlight, where mass media amplifies all the trauma that they are suffering as if freezing them into an incurable wound. The close-up confrontation between the survivors and the viewers equalizes the role and tension between the two. On one hand, Attie's works also confront reality with silence, pushing the viewer to realize that anyone can be a victim. But what can help them to move on and how?

Art training often emphasizes individuality and puts the originator under the spotlight. Such a mindset, however, risks neglecting the involvement of community. As informed by his psychotherapeutic background, Attie hones his listening skill to decenter himself. Even though he is the artist behind the creative collaboration, he sees the participants and casts as protagonists instead. Attie also avoids posing leading questions in regards to traumatic experience. His artistic decisions are primarily made through his communication with participants.

To assimilate himself better to a scarred community's collective experience, Attie often resides with them for a span of two to three months. The rapport built during the residency allows him to unearth the most relevant essence that speaks to the community's collective resilience. With Attie's humanitarian approach to transcend traumas and foster hope, he ameliorates the wrongful take that the general public and mass media have developed towards the victims. Disasters might have devastated a community, but a piece of compassionate work can restore sufferers' faith. Many works have glorified the greatness of the artist, but Attie's transcending approach revitalizes many victims, helping them to stand against their suffocating suffering.



Gordon Fung is a transdisciplinary artist who works across various fields, including: installation, music composition, sound art, video art, multi-/ new media, experimental and conceptual arts, etc. With the use of unconventional materials like noises, lo-fi presentations, and glitches, his immersive and synaesthetic works challenge the viewers to expand their experiential horizon.