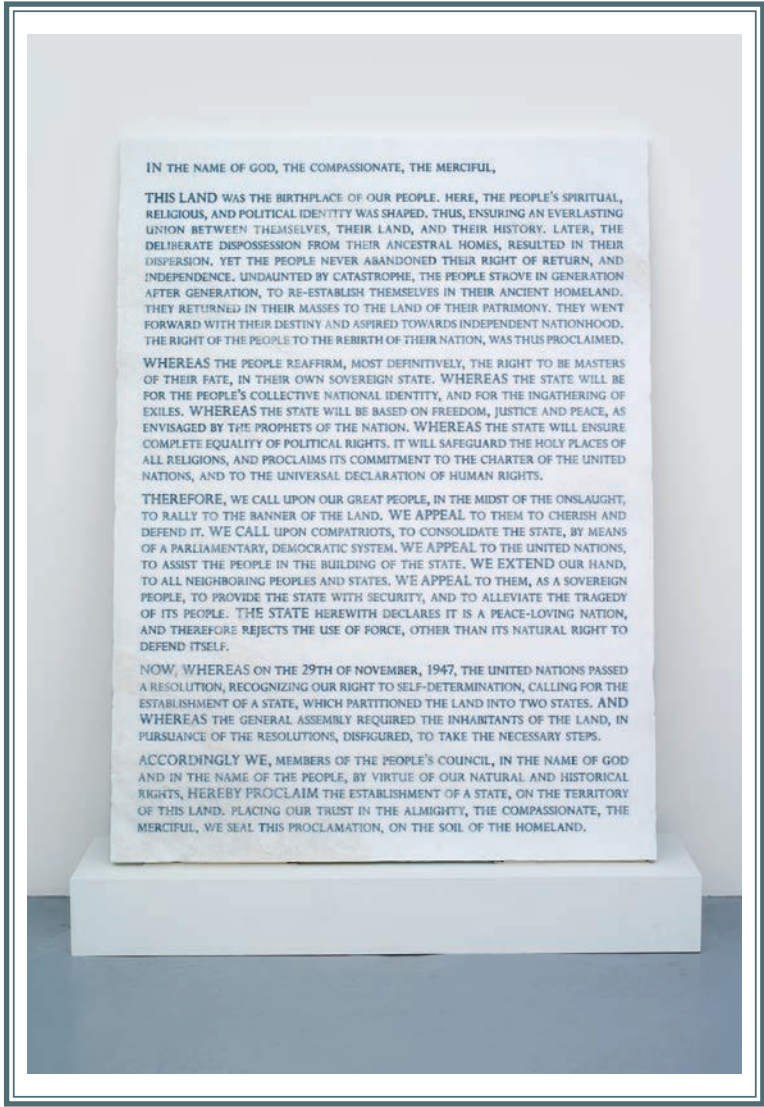


# MetroPAL.IS.

SHIMON ATTIE



Tablet Untitled (Blended Israeli and Palestinian Declarations of Independence, abbreviated), 2012, courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

We must think differently,  
look at things in a different way.  
Peace requires a  
world of new concepts,  
new definitions.  
—YITZHAK RABIN

I come from there and  
I have memories  
Born as mortals are, I have a mother  
And a house with many windows,  
I have brothers, friends...  
—MAHMOUD DARWISH  
I Come From There

**MetroPAL.IS.** is an immersive video installation that reconstructs the conventional view of Israeli-Palestinian relations as fundamentally conflictual. At the center of the piece is Shimon Attie's remarkably creative and thought-provoking merging of the Israeli and Palestinian declarations of independence into a single text. The work consists of eight 65-inch monitors, arranged in a freestanding ellipse, each inhabited by one of twenty-four characters from the Israeli and Palestinian communities of New York City reading from the text. By highlighting the similarities of the two original documents and the multiple and overlapping identities of each individual represented, Attie challenges the assumption that their national identities are fixed and inherently incompatible.

Over the past twenty years, Attie has developed a body of work that explores and reconfigures ideas of history, memory, and identity. Working in photography, video, and site-specific installations, Attie taps into the shared cultural memory of communities and the specific events that inform their collective identity. He often uses actual individuals from a community to help reimagine it, whether working with the residents of a Welsh village scarred by tragedy, as in *The Attraction of Onlookers: Aberfan—An Anatomy of a Welsh Village* (2006), or with the hidden history of European Jews, as in *The History of Another* (2003) and *The Writing on the Wall* (1992–93). In so doing, Attie engages the past with the present and gives form to memory. He continues his interest in history, identity, and memory in *MetroPAL.IS.* but ambitiously chooses to focus on two communities whose relationship is famously contentious.

Attie, who is Jewish and of Syrian descent, always knew that he would eventually address the complicated relations between Israel and Palestine. Born in Los Angeles in 1957, Attie grew up in California but has lived in New York since 1997, spending time in Europe and the Middle East in between. Given his background, he came to this project with

PALESTINIAN VOICES															
WHEREAS THE PEOPLE REAFFIRM,	MOST	DEFINITELY	THE	RIGHT	OF	THE	PEOPLE								
	MOST	DEFINITELY	THE	RIGHT	OF	THE	PEOPLE	OF							
		DEFINITELY	THE	RIGHT	OF	THE	PEOPLE	OF	THEIR						
			THE	RIGHT	OF	THE	PEOPLE	OF	THEIR	RIGHTS					
				RIGHT	OF	THE	PEOPLE	OF	THEIR	RIGHTS	TO				
					OF	THE	PEOPLE	OF	THEIR	RIGHTS	TO	BE			
						THE	PEOPLE	OF	THEIR	RIGHTS	TO	BE	MASTERS		
							PEOPLE	OF	THEIR	RIGHTS	TO	BE	MASTERS	OF THEIR FATE, IN THEIR OWN, SOVEREIGN STATE.	

## ISRAELI VOICES

some cultural familiarity. The challenge for any artist making a work about this subject is to confront the conventional narrative of hostility, to create a work that resists easy interpretation and that doesn't pretend to offer an answer. Bearing in mind his own complicated and layered identity, Attie aimed to create a work that would unravel the layers and find similarities that would complicate the historical narrative, a work that would conflate two narratives long seen as being at irresolvable odds with one another.

As a New Yorker, Attie recognized the potential for insights right outside his door, among the city's sizeable communities of Israeli and Palestinian immigrants. Once he settled on the strategy of choosing subjects who had something vital in common, their status as New Yorkers, it was possible to represent them in ways that spoke to the mutability of their varied identities. By emphasizing the more personal elements of each individual—their jobs, families, and social roles—Attie highlights bonds other than those of religion, ethnicity, or national origin.

In *Imagined Communities*, a seminal study on nationalism and national identity, political scientist Benedict Anderson emphasizes the cultural and imaginative aspects of the nation, which is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" created and sustained through certain cultural artifacts: novels, newspapers, maps, and museums. Anderson connects nationalism to conflict, arguing that "ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings." If, as Anderson posits, national identity is a social construct, susceptible to change and evolution, does it follow that the importance of political and geographical communities associated with nations is diminishing in an age of globalization? In the wake of that shift in significance, are new forms of collective identity emerging, ones based on gender, sexuality, professions, shared interests, and countless other connections? Attie's subjects

are Israeli and Palestinian, but he puts equal emphasis on the fact that they are also New Yorkers with various overlapping communities and identities.

In order to emphasize those connections and shared identities, Attie conceived of twelve different characters that represented a range of typical, even stereotypical, New Yorkers—among them, an MTA employee, an orthodox/religious man and woman, a pregnant woman, a tourist, a business man, a falafel cook, a hipster—each to be portrayed by both an Israeli and a Palestinian. The individuals in Attie's previous works had simply assumed static poses and "played themselves." The performers in *MetroPAL.IS.*, by contrast, would read from a script and act as Attie's characters. Consequently, a casting call was sent out to the Israeli and Palestinian communities in New York; after extensive auditions, twenty-four actors were selected to bring Attie's characters to life, emerging from their statuesque poses to speak directly to the viewer.

As noted above, the script being performed is a hybrid text, created by Attie and taken from two key documents in the political history of Israel and Palestine. One document, the Declaration of Independence of the state of Israel, was written in 1948 by politicians and lawyers in the midst of a war between Jews and Arabs over the partitioning of Palestine. The other text, the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, was written in 1988 by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and embraced by the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Although the Palestinian declaration was composed forty years after the Israeli document and is considerably longer, there are striking similarities between the two, some ideological and some quite literal. In some cases exact words and phrases overlap. Attie seized on these similarities and merged the two texts, creating what he refers to as a "score" with four movements that build dramatically, revealing both harmony and dissonance. As the work unfolds, the Israeli and Palestinian characters read from their respective national documents, speaking in unison—about

half the time—when the words overlap or coincide. (A section of the score, with Israeli voices in blue and Palestinian voices in green, is illustrated at left.)

Like much of Attie's work, *MetroPAL.IS.* bears the influence of classical ideals and aesthetics. The configuration of monitors in an elliptical shape creates an experience for the viewer that evokes a classical Greek theater in the round, though here the viewer takes center stage. Indeed the piece demands that the viewer become a physical and intellectual participant. The theatricality of the installation is underscored by the almost exaggerated performances of the actors, who emerge from their frozen tableaux, transforming from muted to vivid color to speak to us and to each other. The characters collectively perform the function of the chorus in an ancient Greek play, offering an alternative perspective on the story of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Unlike the Greek chorus, however, where the group's voice is homogenized through costume and masks, Attie's chorus is dressed in costumes that emphasize individuality.

In order to realize the precise symphony of voices in *MetroPAL.IS.*, a great deal of work was done during post-production, which happened in the winter of 2010 while Attie was working in residence in the Wexner Center's Film/Video Studio. Starting with a paper score, Attie worked with Wexner Center sound editor Paul Hill to build the soundscape, achieving synchronization through splicing and overlapping words and by playing with tempo and harmony and speed. The result recalls an *a capella* singing group, where harmony is found in the convergence of a wide range of individual voices (and, in *MetroPAL.IS.*, opinions).

Since making *MetroPAL.IS.*, Attie has continued to work with his hybrid text, creating a body of work that includes prints and a sculpture. Using materials that are new to his practice, including marble, lenticular printing, letterpress, and Braille prints, Attie has found other ways to connect the two documents using the graphic aesthetics of text and material. Included in this exhibition is *Tablet Untitled (Blended Israeli and Palestinian Declarations of Independence, abbreviated)* (2012), which transforms a version of Attie's hybrid document into three dimensions in the form of a monumental marble tablet, inscribed with text. There is an obvious reference to the story of the Ten Commandments and a clear relationship to *MetroPAL.IS.*, with its frozen figures resembling marble statues brought to life by the text and its monitors themselves serving, perhaps, as modern-day versions of the stone tablet. Together this collection of new works represents a profound cultural artifact, one that stimulates the reimagination of communities.

JENNIFER LANGE

Curator, Film/Video Studio program

## About the Artist

Shimon Attie was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1957 and received his MFA degree in 1991. Since that time, he has been commissioned to create numerous works of art in more than ten countries around the world. In many of his projects, he engages local communities in finding new ways of representing their history, memory, and potential futures, and he explores how contemporary media, such as photography and video, may be used to reimagine new relationships between space, time, place, and identity. He is particularly concerned with issues of loss, communal trauma, and the potential for regeneration.

In earlier works, Attie reanimated architectural and public sites with images of their lost histories and investigated how histories of marginalized and forgotten communities might be visually introduced into the physical landscape of the present. His projects in this vein encompassed on-location slide projections in Berlin's former Jewish quarter (*The Writing on the Wall*, 1992–93), underwater light boxes in Copenhagen's Borsgraven Canal (*Portraits of Exile*, 1995), and sophisticated laser projections illuminating tenement buildings on New York's Lower East Side (*Between Dreams and History*, 1998). He has described these works as, in part, "a kind of peeling back of the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried underneath."

More recently, Attie has completed a number of immersive multiple-channel HD video installations. These have included *The Attraction of Onlookers: Aberfan—An Anatomy of a Welsh Village* (2006), a commission from the BBC and the Arts Council of Wales on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster, in which a manmade avalanche buried the village's only elementary school; *Racing Clocks Run Slow: Archaeology of a Racetrack* (2007), a piece inspired by the former Bridgehampton Auto Racetrack in Bridgehampton, Long Island; and *Sightings: The Ecology of an Art Museum* (2008), a commission from San Francisco's de Young Museum that explores the heightened moment of mutual encounter between art viewer and art object. Attie is working on a commission from the city of San Francisco, and its Arts Commission, for a police memorial artwork for the entry lobby of the new Public Safety Building in Mission Bay.

Attie has exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and the Miami Art Museum. He has received fellowships from the John S. Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the American Academy in Rome (The Rome Prize), the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, and Kunstfonds (Germany's equivalent of the NEA).

TEXT ADAPTED FROM THE ARTIST'S WEBSITE, SHIMONATTIE.NET.

## On view May 4–August 4, 2013

SHIMON ATTIE WITH VALE BRUCK  
MetroPAL.IS., 2011  
Eight-channel high-definition  
video installation  
Digital video, color, sound  
Running time: 11 mins., 41 secs.  
Editor and audio post-production:  
Paul Hill, Wexner Center for the Arts  
Production Managers: Neta  
Zwebner-Zaibert and Hilla Medalia  
(kNow Productions)  
Field Producer: Jamie Abrahams  
Commissioned by The Aldrich  
Contemporary Art Museum,  
Ridgefield, Connecticut  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

SHIMON ATTIE  
Tablet Untitled (Blended Israeli and  
Palestinian Declarations of Independence,  
abbreviated), 2012  
Digital video, color, sound  
Blast-carved and lacquer-filled  
inscriptions on custom-treated  
sugar-white marble  
42½ x 57½ x 1¼ inches  
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery,  
New York

## Artist's Acknowledgments

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SHIMON ATTIE

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