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Tomasz Szerszeń: We are talking in the Asymetria Gallery in Warsaw just before the opening of your exhibition *The Benjamin Constellation*.¹ I have the impression that it is a focal point for what you are doing—many things are mingled together here. So could you tell us how you arrived at this idea? And how do you understand the question of dialectics, the dialectical image? Then there is the task of the historian, the link between history and photography—a vision of history as a crime scene, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin—which is very much present in your projects. Another thing which is more biographical and rather delicate: the state of being a German-speaking artist (and thinker) in France is also a question that is worth discussing. Finally, if you could explain how you came up with the idea of superposing text onto image.

Arno Gisinger: Well, I could start very simply just with a biographical fact: indeed, I went to Paris in 2005 with a very clear plan to live and to work there, because, as you perhaps know, I undertook part of my studies in France. It is important to say that part of my method as an artist derives from my initial studies in Austria at the university and from my theoretical interests. You should know that in my generation, in the 1980s and 1990s, photography had quite an ambiguous status, especially in the German-speaking world. The people who dealt with photography in any theoretical sense at that time came from comparative literature.

Krzysztof Pijarski: Just like everywhere else, consider Roland Barthes...

AG: Yes, this is a European phenomenon. Definitely in Austria, Germany and in some English speaking countries too, the researchers interested in photography at this time had a background in literature, narratives, and also history. When I was a young student (and photo amateur) I came in contact with these methodologies and this was very important for me. A this time I was quite naive, just learning new
working methods, but now when I think of it, it was very important for my becoming an artist.

**KP:** Whom did you read back then? German speaking scholars?

**AG:** Yes, there were especially some journals about photography in German speaking countries like *Fotogeschichte, Camera Austria,* and a little bit later *Eikon.* I studied German literature and contemporary history in Innsbruck and my interests lay in sources, archives, all that methodology. This was the time when historians were very interested in new kinds of sources like oral history, visual history, etc. So, even in this seemingly unrelated part of my study, I was theoretically in touch with photography.

I was an amateur photographer at the time, and when I finished my studies in Innsbruck I really wanted to know more about this medium in a practical sense, and also about photo history, to have a practice other than an amateur one. I found the school in Arles, L’École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie, where I spent three years, and then I went back to Austria, and finally, I decided to live and work in Paris. I was a bit frustrated while living in Austria and I decided to put the focus on my artistic practice, and I felt that this was good place to be and that I had some people there who were pushing and encouraging me. So I went there in 2005 and I initiated the Benjamin project. You’re completely right—today, when you look at it in the context of my other work, it’s something that focuses on some essential points from my formation, concerning also a confrontation with the city of Paris.

Everybody read Benjamin, everybody was a fan of his writings and this was the time when he became a worldwide phenomenon. It was a little bit naive when I started, but anyhow, I came to live in Paris with the complete works of Benjamin in my library. This aspect also touched my own story, the German speaking artist in Paris, introducing the question of language. I don’t compare my experience with that of Benjamin, but it was a question of how the city was dealing with it at the time, and how somebody who arrived there speaking only German was dealing with the situation. And, as I’d already worked a lot about WWII and the problem of exile, he seemed a perfect figure.
Benjamin’s letters published by Suhrkamp Verlag were the crucial point though. They were a real discovery for me, because it is there that I realized that he had this incredible capacity to consider himself as an object and at the same time a subject of history. So on the one hand you can read very pragmatic things there, as when you write letters to your friends—I went there, I did this and I ate this—and he is completely immersed in the life of the period. But at the same time he suddenly becomes the philosopher, the analyst of his times, the historian of the present. In these moments you get very deep and intelligent analyzes of the whole situation, and he says very clearly: I’m part of history. We know this from, amongst others, his Theses on the Philosophy of History, but it is already in his letters where he thinks of himself as both an object and a subject. I discovered very quickly that his Parisian exile was in fact a European exile, and I saw that I had to go to many other places, not only to Paris. Then I got in touch with a researcher, Nathalie Raoux, and at the end of a long work in progress we did the book Konstellation. Walter Benjamin en exil together. Because she is one of the few French philosophers who also works in the archives, who really specialized in Benjamin’s biography. She would know everything; I could ask her what room he lived in at some hotel. She is an incredible source, working with a special status and her own research program at the EHESS, and for 20 or 25 years her main research has been Benjamin’s biography in France. She also very clearly made me aware of how to write, or not to write, a Benjamin biography. As you know, Benjamin is this mythical figure, with his heroic suicide in Portbou. When we went to Portbou there were 200 people every day pilgrimaging to pay their respects to Benjamin. So he is an intellectual saint—at the beginning, in the 60s, in the German speaking context, and now worldwide. On the one hand I’m a part of this, but on the other we tried to find a form which would also effect a very Brechtian distancing. We were writing some kind of near-biography but it also was something singular, because we were trying to (re)construct something of the past, a very Benjaminian gesture.

As I always do in my works, I start from the present and use historical material, historical figures, or historical text as a mirror of our own time. At the beginning it was something personal, biographically related to Paris, but very quickly the question of exile, the status of an exile emerged, and with it that of topography, language and more generally Europe after 2000. This was the first layer. The second layer was Benjamin himself, his thinking, his texts about photography. This
was also a major strain for me: how could I approach Benjamin, with so many intelligent people who have written about him, and say anything new or interesting—how to add something to that?

I started out with reading once again the *Little History of Photography*, and I realized very quickly that the books that he had on his table while writing were, on the one hand, on 19th century photography, and on the other hand very contemporary ones: the pioneers of photography, and then the latest books of August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch. Once again, the contemporary and history are mirroring each other.

I responded by looking for a very 19th century photographic style, in this tradition of the tripod, of the shifted photograph with clear vertical elements—a photography which is dealing with the disappearance of the operator based on visibility, a so to say clear access to things with full depth of field. Something that would relate me in my practice to 19th century photography, and also to the 1920s and 1930s. A photographic gesture where everything seems to simply be there, and where you have the illusion of access to the thing itself, but anyhow it’s not there; this kind of disappearance. And then I broke this illusion by introducing the text, and also by this idea of the dialectical image, at least my interpretation of it.

I was quite aware also of the pilgrimages along Benjamin’s traces, and also of this photographic tradition connected with mass tourism. I was thinking a lot about this: how can I make my project and avoid this Benjamin tourism? Then the letters—I had read them some time before that—came to my mind. I simply took the books with me while traveling, and confronted the text once again with the places where they’d been written. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it was totally disappointing. Sometimes, even if you find this direct relationship, it turns out to be vapid: this is the bedroom where Benjamin slept…

**KP**: The *wie es gewesen* of history…

**AG**: The *wie es gewesen* (Leopold von Ranke) is exactly the point. As you know, Benjamin is completely inverting this. Siegfried Kracauer, another German intellectual who is very important to me, said it is no coincidence that photography—
as a medium—was invented at the same time as modern history. And the wie es gewesen is also the gesture of this type of photography...

**KP:** And one of the central myths of photography.

**AG:** Absolutely. My idea was to deconstruct this myth. My intention behind superposing the text onto the image was to disturb it and to create something like a third image, a kind of montage. In the end I arrived at just 36 images, one image per place. When we went to Svendborg (Denmark) for instance, I made about 200 pictures and then I chose one, in relation to the other images and the text. My idea was that these two images, or imaginings, were creating a third image—a dialectical one. The third image arises in the eye, or the imagination of the spectator. I was convinced that the text should also be treated as a layer of the image which will be inside and outside of it, in front of it or behind it. It depends on how you were looking at the image or the text before, and it is eventually reading and looking...

**KP:** This is something I want to ask you about, because obviously you don’t negotiate the space. You don’t try to place the text so that it works with the specific images, it’s exactly like you said: it’s another layer, it’s superposed. Sometimes it is even in conflict with the image, because you have these moments when it becomes unreadable, forcing you to look very closely. Furthermore, as I noticed, the text is aligned throughout the project, so that when you align the pictures you also align the text, a formal decision that was clearly taken outside of the specificity of the images in the project.

**AG:** Exactly, but when I do the montage, I try to figure out how the text will work with the image. It’s not completely aléatoire. And then there is this second aspect which is the materiality of the work. I wanted to go back to this blueback paper I was experimenting with since the late 1990s, which is for me not in the same tradition as, in the French context, Jean-Luc Moulène for instance—to refer to another artist whose work is very important for me—who worked with similar materials but in the context of affiche in the sense of an image in public space. I was working with an Italian enterprise producing ink-jet technologies—Durst.
Known for their enlargers, they quickly realized that the new digital technology would replace the analogue, so they were looking for a very precise photographic image but on ink jet print. They were developing machines and at that time I acted as an artistic consultant for them. They were testing the machines on blueback paper, and then they’d throw it away, not a material to keep really. I realized that the quality of the image is very good. The decision was very clear—not to have this stable form of a framed image, but something which allowed me to develop a certain sense of space. Every time the format, and also sometimes decisions about how to cut images, how to install them, are adapted to the given space.

Here, in Asymetria, in response to Rafał Lewandowski’s invitation, I proposed the Constellation project, because I wanted to confront it with the archives of Jerzy Lewczyński. The format here is much smaller than usual, because the space is not so big. But I love it too, because it’s more intimate. And coming back to the problem of text: in the bigger format of the print, the relationship between the image and the text is quite different. Here the text seems more important, since the image is less imposing. It is very interesting for me to see how people will look at it.

Also the question of typography is important here. It also has to do with intuition. For example, while I was working with an inventory of the looted objects of Viennese Jews (Invent arisiert, 2000), it was very difficult to decide on typography. Finally, I opted for Helvetica, which is not neutral at all, but it was the best thing for me at the time. These were lambda prints and I put the text in white against a grey background—in fact the floor, on which I put all the objects to photograph them—in very protocol way. So when I was taking the pictures I already knew where I would put the text, and I had this reserved for it in the frame. There the text was replacing or accompanying the object, whereas in the Benjamin project the text interferes with the object of the photograph, disturbing it. It’s also, technically speaking, different, because the lambda print is still a chemical print. Konstellation Benjamin is different again because the white is just the untouched white of the paper, establishing this unstable relationship between foreground and background. Typographic questions are quite delicate, because there is so much cultural tradition and background in typography. I’m very sensitive
to graphic design without being a specialist. It is the same with architecture. These two domains are very important for my photographic works: architecture and graphic design.

**KP:** And the pictures you’ve just shown us of the looted objects, they strike me as a different exercise. I would say, they look like posters. You could show them as posters in a public space. The structure of the images is such, they have this kind of strong, direct message like a poster should. They would be readable if you had a hundred of them in the city space of Vienna—they would absolutely work in public space. This question of typography, is something that reappears in several of your projects.

**TS:** So there weren’t presented as large format?

**AG:** No. The images are quite small, they measure 20 x 25 cm each, but in this case all 645 plates, displayed on one wall, form one composite image or, let’s say, one installation. You can have an institutional reading of these objects, where everything is on the same level, but there is another important aspect which is that of the property of a specific family. I actually put together all the looted objects of eight families, so you can read the project in a very “Boltanski” way: as a portrait of a family and the belongings of that family. You can have this double reading, but I think what is most important are the missing objects. Since I have more missing objects than physically present ones, the wall as a whole was rather grey with some colourful points and spots, but the rest was just absence, which was clearly coming out of the inventory itself. I was really surprised when I put it up for the first time on a wall, that this new image, deriving from my approach to that visual archive, was more of an absence of things than of their accumulation.

When I’m talking about archives, it’s more about sources than about archives in the general sense. Also because it’s so trendy and so “important” to talk about archives today. I studied this 25 years ago and I’m sometimes fed up with this *mode de l’archive*. We tried to push this problematic a little bit further in the context of a Summer University in 2015 with the Centre Pompidou, where I participated not
only as an artist but as a co-organizer. It’s about absence, about looted art. It was called *Les sources au travail*, “the sources at work” and it raised the question: “How can we make sources work and how can we work with sources?” We had this space on the 4th floor of the Centre Pompidou, where we tried to imagine another form of presenting and working together, a very Warburgian undertaking. We had a huge vitrine-table installed in front of a grey wall with a white reserve. At this table 25 persons worked together for 10 days. On the table there was this vitrine with different sources and on the wall we’d collect all the images used by the speakers and participants.

We invited researchers and artists who worked on the topic of looted art—I also presented my own work in that context—and we confronted the artistic methodologies with historians, art historians, etc. I set up my camera for the whole duration of the project and made 500 images from the same point of view, this is also documentation.

We explored the French and Parisian topography, especially that, as you perhaps know, the Jeu de Paume was the place where artworks were first stolen by the occupants and then shipped to Linz in Austria, for the Führer Museum or other places, and private collections. So Jeu de Paume was the storage and the inventory space. And also Palais de Tokyo was where they stored pianos. There were hundreds of stolen pianos from Paris in the basements of the Palais de Tokyo... The idea for the workshop came from Didier Schulmann who did the first edition of the Summer University two years ago. He continues this tradition and he tries to introduce new working methods.

**TS:** What you said is also very topical in our local, Polish, context...

**AG:** I can absolutely imagine why that is so. Loopted art or looted objects were a very difficult topic in the 1980s in Austria too. This was perhaps a starting point of my work, ideologically and politically speaking. I’m clearly part of a generation who brought up questions which were not discussed for nearly 50 years after WWII. In Austria it was definitely the period of the 80s and 90s when young historians,
artists, art historians, intellectuals, writers, citizens, everybody was concerned by this question, by this denial in a very Freudian sense, so I’m clearly influenced by this question. And I found in photography a medium which was, for me, able to say something about this. Appearance, reappearance, disappearance, reconstitution, reconstruction, illusion—political work in fact. Going then to looted art was some kind of going into the heart of the question, different from the subject of Inventarisert, because these were private objects, not very precious in terms of market value, but very precious in a personal sense.

**KP.** What did photography give you, or still does give you, that other tools don’t give you? Why is it such an important tool for you?

**AG.** I don’t know, this is perhaps very banal, because everybody says it—this is the medium which is attached to the referent in a certain way... Perhaps not in this mythical, Barthesian sense of the trace, because I think this is more a cultural construction than an ontological condition. In German we would say *Ein Rest des Authentischen*—[vestiges of the authentic]. It’s not the physical trace of something, but we still feel this attachment to the real. On the other hand there is this incredible capacity to go into fictional zones. And I think that photography, by this culturally constructed attachment to reality, is the best medium for me. In a certain sense I try to follow the idea of Kracauer, to say something about how we construct history and how we can rewrite history in the present time. Photography is just a perfect instrument for me. Is it because ontologically photography has this or that specific aspect? I don’t really know. I’m more and more skeptical about all the ontological questions: “photography is this, so this is the reason why I would use it.” I even think that less and less theoretical approaches now try to find the sense on this ontological level, like Roland Barthes did: “this is specific for photography and this is the difference from other media.”

**KP.** There have been some attempts to return to ontology, like James Elkins’ *What Photography Is*. But maybe the question should be: what can photography do, or what can we do with photography?
**AG**: Yes, I agree, because images can be “sources at work,” as we said. This is also once again coming from my initial studies—as I already mentioned I’m very much fascinated by photography as a source. In this context, creating new photographs is on the same level for me as reusing, reinterpreting, or integrating old photographs into my own work. A good example would be my project for Hohenems (Dies ist der Stuhl für den Paten, 2001) in Austria, also on looted objects. There was nothing left in this little village from the Jewish community, just a document in the archives produced by Austrian Nazis, who made a list of all the liturgical objects of the synagogue. Officially everything has disappeared, we don’t know where it is, all that is left is this document. Then there is another source, a photographic source, which is very different to the written one—it was made by a Jewish ethnographer—a photograph of a double stool from Hohenems taken in the 1920s as an example of the liturgical practice of assimilated Jewish communities, perhaps already in the fear that this culture might disappear. This ethnographer (Theodor Harburger) was traveling around in the region and made hundreds of photographs. The only photograph he made in Hohenems was this stool, and it is the only existing photograph of this object.

**KP**: Is the object on the list?

**AG**: It is on the list, but the only way to see it, to mark its presence, is this photograph. With all the problems of the photograph. This is somebody who says “well, our culture is very interesting, a result of 19th century assimilation in the region of the Lake of Constance in Germany, Switzerland and the Western part of Austria, so let’s do a recollection of these things with photography.” I mean, this is a fascinating idea for me, it’s a question of sources. Sometimes perhaps I could say I’m creating new sources, and sometimes I’m just using or reinterpreting existing ones. And photography is a tool to do this, but it’s not a sense in itself.

**KP**: What kind of experience are you after when you show your work? What is it that you want to do to the viewer, receiver?

**AG**: This is a very important point and it’s related to the status of photography, perhaps another answer for what you asked me about the medium—what really
fascinates me is its capacity to have very different statuses. It can be a very banal image, an album photograph, it can be a work of art, or an illustration of something. And this is perhaps the specific point of photography— it can have so many faces, so many uses, so many interpretations. I think, the real point for me is how the photographic image can be used, regarded in an anthropological way. As you know, I’m familiar with Georges Didi-Huberman’s thinking and theory. In that sense I think we found each other— me from a practical point of view and he from a philosophical point of view. But this is indeed the most important point for me. How do we look at photographs? In what cultural and physical context do we look at them? And since I’m working in between history and art, I understand photography as an emanation of the past and as creation in present time. This ambiguity was quite a problem for a certain time in my work, when I wanted to consider myself an artist. Because some people said “this is documentary, this is not art” or “You can only understand the work if you give an explication in a historical sense.” I tried to place my work in-between this, and it was quite uncomfortable for a long time. Now, with experience in these kinds of projects, I’m a little bit more confident perhaps, and I would say: no, this is exactly the interesting point, because these images change with the context of the presentation. We can come back to Benjamin, which I have shown in different places and different forms. This work has completely changed here, in Asymetria, in the context of Warsaw. It’s clearly not the same work and this is incredible. My intention is to confront my work with a specific context, and to have feedback from there.

**TS:** What you said is also important for a better understanding of the projects you did with Georges Didi-Huberman (Atlas, suite, Afteratlas, Nouvelles histoires de fantômes). The exhibitions were changing with the context and then becoming something different, in a very Warburgian sense.

**AG:** Yes, indeed. This is a link coming from this project, because, you have perhaps seen that Georges Didi-Huberman at that time made a little postface in the book about the Benjamin project, published in 2009. A couple of years later he called me for the Atlas project so the idea was coming from him. He said: “I have this huge exhibition at the Reina Sofia. People want me to continue the project, but I don’t want to continue and I can’t continue it, because it’s too expensive… But could we make a project together in a very Benjaminian sense—a photographic interpretation of an exhibition? I thought of your Benjamin work with your method of gluing the
paper to the wall, of adapting the work to the site, and not transporting another work of art—this could be a good idea.”

So it’s very logical that Atlas, suite and the work with Georges Didi-Huberman was coming from the Benjaminian focus and going further into the question of what photography does to, or with, a work of art. It’s an economic question, a question of the status of art. I thought that this was a very difficult thing to do and I was searching for my own approach to this. And the answer came from Warburg. As you know Warburg was one the first art historians to use photography systematically. Then he invented this dispositif device for his Atlas Mnemosyne, going back to the tradition of the atlas from the 18th, and 19th centuries. Some photographs he ordered from well-known photographers like the Alinari Brothers, sometimes he just cut them out from the newspaper. This collaboration with Georges Didi-Huberman was about—to say it after Warburg—the Nachleben of his own invention. In fact, we perceive the Atlas Mnemosyne photographically, because the second step was as important as the first one—he asked his assistant to make a photograph of each constellation, which is something contradictory to his open process.

KP: It was giving this certain finality to the constellation. Have you noticed that nobody has attempted to reconstruct the Atlas in color? It’s always reproduced in black and white, whereas the materials Warburg used were varied, with different colors of paper, different senses of materiality, and the act of re-photographing them totally flattens out this kind of texture. That’s also something that Georges Didi-Huberman talked about in this exhibition—that is why is it horizontal, at least to me. It is thought of as a working surface. If you make something vertical, it’s kind of final, it’s done. In French, Didi-Huberman makes a distinction between table and tableau...
AG: It’s very interesting what you’re saying. The black and white is an aspect of this general thing I’ve tried to say. The photographic is clearly mediating our perception of the Warburgian work. And you can see it in the publications of the last few years. It’s fixing something. And it’s even contradictory to Warburg’s ideas. This is exactly the paradox of photography—while we have a knowledge about his methods thanks to photography, it is photography that produces this still image, freezing for once and for all what was a dynamic way of working with images.

KP: This is the fetishistic aspect of photography. It makes fetishes that we are unable to touch. Further generations of scholars interpret the reproductions; they do not interpret the gestures, they interpret the image.

AG: Are you familiar, in that context, with the actual discussions about the question of exhibition photographs? There is a large discussion going on in Paris, in France, among specialists, but there are also research projects at institutions like the Centre Pompidou or Bétonsalon. The first research was done ten years ago by Rémi Parcollet who has written a doctoral thesis about the genre of exhibition photographs. Bétonsalon did an exhibition quoting Susan Sontag: “We only remember the photographs” (On ne se souvient que des photographies).7 This is exactly the topic. With Warburg we only remember the photographs, with exhibitions it is the same thing. Our memory is definitely photographic. We will only remember the photographs of works of art. Warburg didn’t really formulate it in a theoretical way, but intuitively he was very aware of it. We were discussing many times with Georges Didi-Huberman this relationship between the artist and the photograph, and the role photography plays in the perception of art history. Coming from Wölflin, going to Warburg and to Malraux, up to the very contemporary questions of how photographic images transform our perception of exhibitions and works of art. Rémi Parcollet says something very interesting: he talks about the patrimonialisation (heritagisation) of exhibitions via photography. Photography is freezing it. I think we should really think about this aspect. And it’s a fetish, you are completely right. I think this will be a very important thing in the future, because in our way of dealing with images now there is a tension between the fetishization and the flux of images, so it is perhaps no coincidence that we rediscover Warburg, because there is a fear of this flux.
**KP**: What is paradoxical to me, is that in this age and time where theoretically there is a free flow of images, where we could freely use photographs to think instead of words—not only by taking them, but also by (re)using, re-contextualizing them, etc. There are more and more movements or initiatives which in fact block this. To share is more and more difficult, because there are more and more regulations that prohibit it. Have you ever had this kind of problem with your work? Did anybody lay claim to your pictures?

**AG**: I never had real problems but maybe the *Atlas* project will make an interesting case study. The point is that we don’t have explicit permission from all the artists appearing there. This is perhaps the weakest and the most interesting point of the project. Until now we have had no problems whatsoever and we always said that if somebody doesn’t want to be shown like this, we can exclude the given image from the project, but we didn’t contact all the artists or all the institutions. We had permission to photograph in the space, so for us this was a way to do it, like a photographer who is allowed to photograph an exhibition. But now the big question is the status of this work. As you know, we did four exhibitions, and I always claim that there is no original, no new work of art, it’s more like theater interpretation, *répertoire*, for a limited period. But now, as we have finished the project, the question is what to do with this, what status does it have. This is an important question that we have at the moment with Georges, because there is one institution which would be interested to have it, but the first question was rights, of course. Now, coming back to your question, I am obliged to clarify all the rights with all the people concerned. On the other hand—I am not trying to sell it, to capitalize it in the sense of money so I told them that my interest is just to conserve it, so I’d prefer to give them my archives, with the documentation of all four projects. The answer was “Well, this very difficult, because *acquisition* doesn’t concern archives. You can offer us your archives but acquisition concerns only a work of art,” and we are back at the problem of rights. So I’m not even able to offer my archives on the... it’s quite complicated. The rights need to be cleared for the institution to be able to buy a work, and then I can give them, as an apparatus, my archive to accompany it. And it will have the status of an apparatus to gain an insight into the working methods of the artist, but it doesn’t have the status of
a work of art. It’s complimentary to the acquisition of a work of art.

**TS:** Let’s talk about this notion of “in-between” in the context of your projects. Your attitude, your position, is problematic in some sense. You take a position between being a historian and being a photographer, but also being a curator. I want also to mention here that you are *maître de conference* at the university Paris VIII. I would come back to *Atlas* because your position is also very interesting there: you are not a curator, in fact you are not part of the main exhibition as an artist, you’re somebody who is...

**AG:** Coming afterwards?

**TS:** Yes, exactly. Somebody who is coming afterwards and looking at it from a distance.

**AG:** A very interesting question, and largely discussed with all four institutions which showed the project. Some of them didn’t have any problem with this kind of undefined situation, for others it was a problem. Regarding Georges’ and my own involvement—what was our role exactly? That of a curator? That of a photographer, of an artist? To be sure, these questions came from outside, because when we started the project, we didn’t know where we were going with it exactly, it was all very intuitive, and not very elaborated theoretically. It was more a question of doing, and the concepts and the theoretical problems came out of doing it. So it’s a question of a collaboration of an art historian and a photographer, creating something which is difficult to define. We were at the same time the curators and the inventors of a specific form. In the Palais de Tokyo it was quite interesting: the invitation had come from the director Jean de Loisy, but then very quickly we had a curator who was working with us, and a technical team. The curator was quite uncomfortable, because there was Georges Didi-Huberman coming with this project, and he was very much admiring Georges and his work. And there was this photographer, but what was he was really doing? So he very quickly said: “No, I’m not the curator here, I just accompany the project.” He distanced himself from his curatorial role, and we started to set up the show together, in collaboration with the technical team.
Conceptually it was a response to the given exhibition space, and it came from other experiences, like my work about panoramas and what I called the *faux terrain*. In Le Fresnoy, where we had a large space with a circle of a balconies which was going around, the photographic images were in the back of the balconies, and the projections were in the middle. Then when we saw the Palais de Tokyo and this beautiful curve, and we decided to adapt this to another sense of space, to have only one balcony allowing one to walk into the projected images on the ground floor, which was not possible in Le Fresnoy but which was allowed, or even encouraged at the Palais de Tokyo. You know, *faux terrain* is the zone of a panorama you are not allowed to enter. The idea is to keep you away from the image. And what I was doing at the Palais de Tokyo was going into the forbidden zone, the threshold of the illusion. Is it two- or three-dimensional? Is this a real shoe? When we saw the space we said—well, let’s try to establish a first zone which is based on illusion, so we built a wall and people had to go up a staircase and discover the exhibition like a panorama, where you have to go through a tunnel only to arrive in the middle of the illusion, like in Wroclaw, at the Raclawice Panorama. So at the Palais de Tokyo the first view of the show was immersive, and encompassing. Then we wanted the viewer to descend to the mezzanine, this in-between, where you had another light, this neon light where you could see “oh, this is only paper, not a projection,” and then you’d descend further, and walk amongst and into the images, which were projected from above, into the *faux terrain*. Some people were feeling drunk, others were afraid. All in all we had very interesting responses to this structure of experience, where we first set up an illusion, and then deconstructed it, step by step.

**TS:** Very briefly: what happened with that project in Beirut and in Rio de Janeiro?

**AG:** In Rio we were exhibiting in a very exciting place, the Museu de Arte do Rio, which is on one hand a local museum about the city of Rio de Janeiro, a historical museum, dealing with representation of the history of the city and with political questions of this history and of art. There are two buildings, one is older, from the 19th century, which is the building for art exhibitions. The other building is more recent—it was built in the 1950s and is dedicated mostly to education, with a future library... At
first we were supposed to install on the fourth floor of the art building, but then it turned out that there was not enough space, we were offered the other building, more specifically the site for the future library. We agreed, although technically speaking we didn’t have the possibility to have a closed room, because there is a glass facade with beautiful lights, making work with projections difficult. Because the space was still rather small, we mostly showed the photographic part of *Atlas, suite*, with just a small projection. I printed the pictures on wooden plates and we laid them out on the floor. We arranged these islands on the floor, and it produced the same effect—the viewers had to look at the image from above. And in Beirut it was once again different, because it was at Beirut Art Center—an industrial building in the industrial zone of a politically and historically charged city. Now they try to diminish this aspect a little bit, but... At the time there were these huge advertising billboards everywhere. So my idea was to develop a bigger format, to put these “wallpapers” into the exhibition space. Technically it was also very important for me, because we had two openings, in Beirut in January, and the second in Palais de Tokyo in February, so for a certain time we had both instances of the project at the same time. I wanted to have the same format but another selection of images, to see how the same format would work in the different sites. At the Palais de Tokyo, with its 8 meters of height, I simply needed to have bigger images, and I could test this size in Beirut. The size I chose—240 x 312 centimeters—was quite big for the Beirut Art Center, because the height of the wall is 3 meters there, and relatively small at the Palais de Tokyo.

**Footnotes**


5 Installation at the former Synagogue of Hohenems (Austria).

