



Untitled, 1999

Orit Raff's photographic and sculptural installation *Inside Drawing* creates a space where memory becomes action, where subjectivity develops privately and in the presence of others. In photographs culled from a number of schools in New York, Raff presents evidence of a key moment in the shaping of memory: when the child leaves home, abandoning the domestic realm for the social sphere of school.

The installation transforms the gallery into a disproportionate classroom, where the entry into the social happens through a very specific form of language—writing. Here, memory is composed out of an accretion of marks, the etched traces of inhabitation that Raff finds not on paper, but on desks and walls. Lacan explains that Freud's "whole theory of memory has to do with the sequence of *Niederschriften*, of inscriptions... something that presents itself not simply in terms of *Prägung* or of impression, but in the sense of something which makes a sign and which is of the order of writing."<sup>1</sup> Written language is simultaneously social and immensely private: it is learned outside the home, and yet takes place silently, as the direct, corporeal contact between eye and hand and language.

The concurrent installations of *Inside Drawing* in Berlin and New York conform to the specific sites they inhabit. Each draws out how movement through the exhibition space mimics the movement of narrative. In both, the narrative begins with eight life-size photographs of desks, installed on the underside of an enlarged, 14 ½' x 8 ½' desk-top, which is flipped open. This sculptural element slants gently, breaking the straight angle between horizontal and vertical and reproducing the movement of opening and closing a desk. It creates a kind of internal margin within the gallery, directing our attention to its walls. As in Raff's earlier apartment-based installation *Möbius Strip*, horizontal planes turn into vertical walls, photographs

and sculptural elements combine the exact reproduction of proportion and detail with disproportionate elements that destabilize our visual horizon.

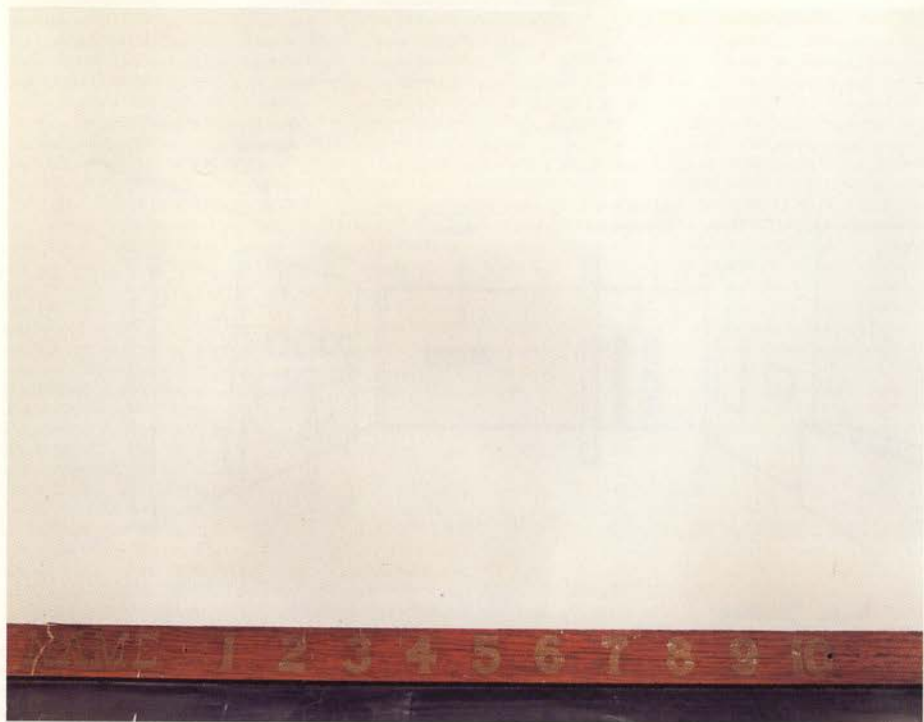
The photographs of desks are inscribed by years of students' use; they are images of writing that is simultaneously drawing and sculpture, between inscription and etching. On the carved desks, writing is sometimes a name, a message, or simply abstract lines that become arrows, geometrical shapes, pyramids. These drawings present the habit of writing, a repeated act of (sometimes indecipherable) carving. The random lines often become a composite drawing: an anonymous student recognizes Abraham Lincoln's profile in them and completes the portrait begun unintentionally by someone else years before. Raff's photographs cause the viewer to search for comprehensible words and recognizable images, a decoding process of inscription that is the action of memory.

Once past these desks, we encounter small images of clean, unmarked notebooks. The mirror-images of the margins of these notebooks underline each viewer's inscription of the narrative of the exhibition, the direction in which we have moved through the space: from right to left, as one reads Hebrew, or the left to right of English. This narrative is thus always an act of translation.

Not a wall, yet not quite an enclosed space, the "closet" relief encountered next is a remnant of the private space of Raff's earlier works. It stores personal belongings like hats and coats and notes from friends. This closet, however, is too shallow to hold much, a false promise of privacy that presents a forbidding wall rather than a comfortable hiding place.



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The final photographs of the surface of a wall, punctured with thumbtack holes, and of an erased chalkboard, show walls again as the site for the always imperfect, repeated inscription and erasure of memory. Walls create corners where dust collects, along with strands of hair and other traces of inhabitation; memory emerges from the stories we compose from these traces.

The shifting margins of Raff's installation might satisfy Freud's desire to imagine "a psychical entity with a... long and copious past... in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one."<sup>2</sup> He dreams of Rome as a model for this relationship between memory and psyche, but concludes that the pictorial representation of such a past-and-present city is impossible. In Jerusalem, where Raff grew up, the Israeli government recently drew criticism for granting permission to build a mosque directly beside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The impossibility of the simultaneous occupation of space by buildings from past and present, from Islamic, Jewish and Christian cultures and religions, structures life in Jerusalem. The walls that surround the Old City are inscribed by history and future narratives of its occupation. Like *Inside Drawing*, they are walls that seem to signify enclosure, yet surround a city that is simultaneously archaic and modern, that holds histories read both left to right and right to left. Life within these walls is pressured, leaving deeply carved inscriptions and conflicting memories.

1. Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. W.W. Norton, 1992  
2. Freud, S. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. W.W. Norton, 1961