

Nobody knows, when it was made and why

The *Mnemosyne Atlas* by the art historian Aby Warburg vividly exemplifies that all research and exploration, be it art or science based, is a historical and anthropological procedure that is closely related to colonialism. Thus, almost every European and North American archive, museum, and scientific inquiry radiates thievery and colonial violence. The *Atlas*, too, outlines and forms knowledge from and about various cultures and practices. However, unlike many historical sciences, it doesn't split the world in two, separating ancient and current, northern and southern empires, and 'their' objects and cultures, instead it searches for continuations of one within the other. In this sense the *Atlas* can be read as a critical and an affective cartography of heterogeneous encounters and practices, drawn from a manifold of origins.

The tableaux, to which Warburg attached photographic images, were made from wooden frames covered with black linen. They were a suggestion by Fritz Saxl and used for lectures in the reading room of the Hamburg library. The original *Mnemosyne Atlas* plates no longer exist. They are only preserved as photographs. The film *Nobody knows, when it was made and why* revisit Warburg's approach to creating a relational and a mutually inclusive methodology. It was shot on black & white 16 mm film in the Aby Warburg Archive in London and shows the first version of photographic reproductions in the format of 18 x 24 cm, dating from 1928. For the *Atlas* Warburg did not confine himself to traditional research objects, he improvised in response to the given form and included everyday items, such as advertisement posters, newspaper clippings and press photos. Unusual for both anthropological and art historical procedures, the image panels contain hardly any captions. As a consequence of Warburg's refusal to assign descriptions, neither offering a reading direction from left-to-right, nor allowing a numbering system into the individual ensemble, it appears as if the *Atlas* does not have a specific research subject. The film *Nobody knows, when it was made and why* works with a collection of images stemming from distant and uncertain geographies, suggesting one perceives *Mnemosyne Atlas* as independent of European cultural history and the imagination of itself. In these images the human is not taking a centralized position, but an entangled one. The film features those images that disclose the intimacy of human and animal bodies — often corresponding to the rays and gravitational forces of the sun, the moon, and other planets.¹

It is difficult to draw any definite conclusions or to derive an unequivocal way of thinking for the *Atlas*. The montage of images, the linkages created between panels, the various depicted practices, stemming from expansive geographies, the events of the macro and the micro cosmos and different temporalities create a fluid territory. It is precisely this openness, the rhizomatic spreading of thematic fields across the panels, the creolization of so called modern and traditional topics that makes a continuous actualization of the *Atlas* possible. Warburg's analytical mode of application does not override, but builds on understandings of resemblances, interrelations, impulses and forces shared between things. By this the *Atlas* provokes similarities and differences, be they of cosmological, astrological, biological, zoological or anthropological nature, revealing and enhancing the intertwining of the earthly and the planetary, the micro and the macro, the local and the nonlocal. Not only are the spatial and temporal coordinates of the images diverse and manifold, they are also filled to the brim, or even better, enlivened by things, minerals, animals, people, amulets and dices, solar and lunar eclipses, intestines, magic stones and starry heavens, suggesting to think of the *Atlas* as blocks of affects.

It is easy to see a connection between Aby Warburg and Henri Bergson who worked around the

same time. Both questioned conservative taxonomies and periodizations commonly used in disciplines such as art history, philosophy or evolutionary sociobiology. They understood the capacity of images and things to reach far beyond the human and her category of representation. For Bergson images are not yet but very close to objects and best understood as durable forces stemming from experience and matter. Martha Blassnigg's insight is very helpful to understand the connection between Warburg's intentions and Bergson's philosophy on images and its full impact. Blassnigg underlines, that Warburg's method to create the *Atlas* led him to understand sensation as a back and forth movement between object and perceiver, between interior and exterior. She demonstrates how this corresponds with Bergson's understanding of perception "that takes place in the object to be perceived"ⁱⁱ by what he calls a "reciprocal interpenetration,"ⁱⁱⁱ a relation that goes far beyond the perception of phenomena. Images are not just passive (objects) to be perceived or studied by an observer — they act, they do things with us. This affective approach rather asks what is it that images can do, than what do images represent or signify? For Bergson matter and images are not separated, but interconnected, mutually interwoven, producing an "endlessly continued creation,"^{iv} a proper creative evolution.

Images, uncoupled from their narrowed role of representation, "organise, uphold, cross, transgress, affirm, or undermine boundaries,"^v as Anselm Franke addresses their capacities. Images themselves become producers of differences and relations. The images of the *Atlas*, by relating to innumerable points in time and space, produce endless differentiations, so that their temporal and territorial points add up and become virtual lines on which they collectively animate themselves. Images and shapes, be they human or nonhuman, of organic or inorganic origin, are aggregated mnemonic storages or strata. Affected by traces of their histories, images generate highly virtual movements, producing their own creative evolution. It might be in this sense that Warburg saw himself as a "seismograph [...], to be placed along the dividing lines between different cultural atmospheres and systems,"^{vi} resonating the rhythms of life, in its versatile and most extended meanings.

Warburg not only collected durable images but also persisting practices and unfamiliar techniques of transformation. In 1896 he travelled to New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, where he visited the territory of American Pueblo Indians in order to attend a performance of the Hopi snake dance, which was already well known at the time. In the end Warburg did not succeed to see the dance. Yet, about thirty years later, while being under psychiatric surveillance himself, he imaginatively constructed it from anthropological observations.^{vii} In *Memories of a Journey through Pueblo Region* Warburg connects the practices and encounters he had experienced with Nietzsche's concept of becoming and transformation. Possibly due to his schizophrenic capacities, he understood that the human and nonhuman are shaped by complex relations that might also change the human significantly, and honored the practices for upholding "fluid borders between human, animal, plant, and mineral, such that man can influence becoming by means of a voluntary connection with the organically foreign being."^{viii} Acknowledging the Pueblo Indian's transformative ontologies and their skillfulness in traversing binaries, Warburg nevertheless ignored their objection to be photographed. Later he explained that the journey had made him realize the intermediate position of images.

Warburg did notice that many cliff dwellings were abandoned and that the railway tracks penetrating Pueblo Indian lands brought tourist flows with them, however, he failed to acknowledge the very concrete political struggle the people were involved in. Warburg's guide was the missionary Heinrich C. Voth, an infamous intruder and photographer of ceremonies. While Warburg recognized Voth's methods of exploitation of knowledge and thievery of Pueblo Indian objects, he didn't oppose Voth's authority. Warburg exploited various objects himself, but after his return to Germany immediately gave them away to the Museum für Völkerkunde in

Hamburg. It remains unclear if this was a gesture of turning the objects over to the museum for ‘research purposes’ and public access (quite common at the time), or whether the displacement of the objects loaded them with a fundamental tension, causing Warburg’s wish to distance himself from them. As an excuse for Warburg’s complicity, Fritz Saxl later wrote that his travel to America initiated the idea to look at European history with the eyes of an anthropologist, thus to start an ethnography of Europe.^{ix}

ⁱ Today these images simultaneously trace their migration into colonial and scientific systematics, into archives such as the Biblioteca Vaticana Rom, British Museum London, Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and others.

ⁱⁱ Martha Blassnigg, “Ekphrasis and a Dynamic Mysticism in Art: Reflections on Henri Bergson’s Philosophy and Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas,” in *Transtechology Research Reader* (Plymouth: Plymouth University, 2011), 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911). 178.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 107.

^v Anselm Franke, “Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries,” in *Animism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 26.

^{vi} Aby Warburg cited in Blassnigg, “Ekphrasis and a Dynamic Mysticism in Art: Reflections on Henri Bergson’s Philosophy and Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas,” 3.

^{vii} He had seen the antelope dance in San Ildefonso and the humiskachina or corn dance in Oraibi, but was relying on Paul Ehrenreichs observation of the snake dance and drawings he asked Hopi children to draw during his visit.

^{viii} Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 325.

^{ix} Fritz Saxl, *Warburg’s Besuch in Neu-Mexico* (London : Warburg Institute, University of London, 1957), 317.