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After Warburg

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After Warburg

a cura di
Maurizio Ghelardi e Daniela Sacco

direttore

monica centanni

redazione

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Engramma
Castello 6634 | 30122 Venezia
edizioni@egramma.it

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Centro studi classicA luav
San Polo 2468 | 30125 Venezia
+39 041 257 14 61

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Mnemosyne, Itself

Adrian Rifkin

One final point. On the basis of erroneous evidence, Dr Hope finds it hard to resist the conclusion that my husband's review of Sir Ernst Gombrich's biography of Warburg [Wind 1971] was inspired by 'personal animus'. Sir Ernst now cites [*Letters*, 5 April] the entire text of an appreciative letter from my husband about his memorial address for the Warburg centenary in Hamburg. I am at a loss to understand the relevance of this letter. Is it suggested that it committed the author to an equal approval of all Sir Ernst's subsequent writings on Warburg? My husband greatly admired the address (13 pp.); he was gravely disappointed by the biography (375 pp.), finding the impression conveyed there very different: in each case he spoke as he found. Had it been possible – as it then was not – he would certainly have put his name to the review.

Margaret Wind
Oxford

Bertrand Russell to Gilbert Murray
I Tatti, Settignano
Florence
December 28th, 1902

[...] The house is furnished by Berenson with exquisite taste; it has some very good pictures, and a most absorbing library. But the business of existing beautifully, except when it is inherited, always slightly shocks the Puritan soul – thoughts of the East End, of intelligent women where lives are sacrificed to the saving of pence, of young men driven to journalism or schoolmastering when they ought to do research, come up perpetually in my

mind; but I do not justify the feeling, as someone ought to keep up beautiful houses. But I think one makes great demands on the mental furniture where the outside is so elaborate, and one is shocked at lapses that one would otherwise tolerate. [...]

In Ianick Takaes's article in *Engramma*, *L'esprit de Warburg lui-même sera en paix* (2018), with its lengthy appendices of letters between Edgar Wind and other actors in the history of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek and the Warburg Institute, he takes us on a tragi-humanist journey through the loss of an intellectual environment that might never have truly existed, or of which the plenitude or shared qualities had always, already, been a fiction, a utopian imaginary. This is why Francesca Cernia Slovin's *Obsessed by Art* (2006) is such a compelling account of Warburg's life and the confined epic that was the lecture on *Serpent Ritual* (1923, 1928; see Warburg 1938-1939; see also Steinberg 1995 for a publication history of Warburg's lecture). A fiction, this is to say, made out of the forging of an intensely desired yet endlessly fragmentary common purpose, imagined out of the singular memories of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek in Hamburg and the disappointments of exile, the accommodation of its dreamers to a partly hospitable yet often unsuitable environment – that of the inherently anti-Semitic Anglo(American) university between the two wars and in the decade following 1945. This is something that the wealthy, upper bourgeois and artistically conservative society of Hamburg, out of which the city's university and the Warburg Institute could both, in their different but associated fashion have flourished, could not be transported to London as readily as was the library (Klibansky 1998; Schoell-Glass 1998; Russell 2007; Levine 2013, 307-323). And indeed the differences between its closest as well as its occasional participants were already and always differentiated by social and political beliefs, generation and gender.

I enter this not as a scholar of the history of the Warburg Institute nor of its members, but as a once very young and enchanted student who fell under the spell of Edgar Wind, beginning in 1960 with the Reith Lectures, and Helen Rosenau, who communicated to me much of the intellectual and emotional energies of these travails without my realising their veiled substance until recent years. When I went to the Institute to read the *Serpent Ritual*, in 1967, which both these teachers regarded as the starting

point, and which I was to pass on as a starting point in the MA in Cultural Studies at Leeds – in preference to the then rather conventional one of Roland Barthes or Raymond Williams, the *Bilderatlas* was no more than a funny rumour, a suggestive silence – “rien désormais ne m’appartient” (“henceforth, nothing belongs to me”). The library itself provided a magical experience of discovery, from floor to floor, not knowing where to settle and read. To have had too precise a programme would have destroyed it.

Yet the tensions were there. It’s difficult to overlook the near total absence of Gombrich from Wind’s own work on Botticelli, despite the former’s important article of 1945, nor the rumours that Gombrich systematically destroyed copies of *That Review*. And it is indeed possible to note that Wind’s work on Botticelli has lasted better than Gombrich’s, despite the discovery in 1971 that the location of the *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus* was not what either of them had believed, because its appeal is to thinking as such, rather than to a reified idea of a possible ‘truth’ (Shearman 1975; Smith 1975). While footnoting Gombrich with three other scholars in the first edition of *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Wind 1958, 100, fn. 1) as well as in two other footnotes (he is “surely right” in thinking that “the Vespucci favoured painting with wasps...”; Wind 1958, 54, 85), Wind completely dismisses his approach, writing that Ficino’s *In Philebum* 1 flatly contradicts Gombrich’s assertion that “...the visual symbol... is superior to the name” (Wind 1958, 110, fn. 2; Gombrich 1948, 170). He actually strengthens this dismissal in the second edition of *Pagan Mysteries* (Wind [1967]1980, 127, fn. 48), adding another mistaken phrase from Gombrich, that Ficino’s sense for “the special virtues inherent in the visual symbol would have contributed to the enhanced status of the visual arts” (Wind 1980, 184). In *Pagan Mysteries*’s second edition (Wind 1980, 76, fn. 78), Gombrich is again held up as inaccurate in referring to “Politian’s wife” (he had taken holy orders) while later on Wind says his “aggregate of Neoplatonic quotations ... amounts to an error of description like mistaking a vertebrate for a jelly fish”(Wind 1980, 112, fn. 6). Wind twice dismisses Gombrich’s general positivist attitude (Wind 1980, 101, fn. 13; 207, fn. 57).

So in this respect I understand Margaret Wind’s letter to the “London Review of Books” that heads this essay (London Review of Books 1984). But its strategically necessary insistence on the intellectual validity of Wind’s

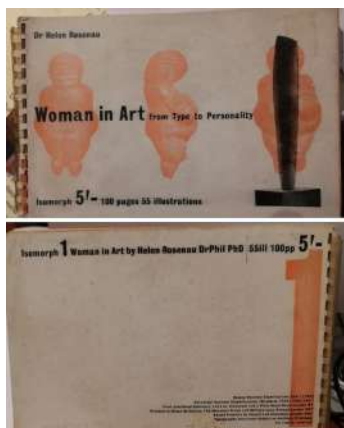
review of Gombrich's biography of Warburg need not mask for us the deep personal hostilities that divided them, a real hatred, certainly evident in the almost obsessive references cited above. If Wind was driven by what he saw as the shabby indifference of Gombrich's positivism, his clear lack of interest in the project of the biography, then that was doubled by an intense dislike of the author and his entire theoretical apparatus. Certainly, when I first read the review in the "Times Literary Supplement" I knew that it was his, as did Helen Rosenau, who had remained on warm terms with Wind and who disliked Gombrich to a similar degree. It is of some anecdotal interest to note that both Wind and Rosenau had a lifelong interest in the circle as a visual form, a structure and as a concept, whether broken or completed by the action of a serpent, with Wind; or before Foucault, panoptical or spherical in an imaginary monument, or town or hospital plan with Rosenau. Neither of them had any truck with Gombrich's over-careful positivism, anchored in a rather crude attachment to what we saw as Popper's cold war politics. Indeed the almost swaggering virtuosity of Wind's paratactical style of argument or the abyssal opening risks of some of Rosenau's speculations in *Woman and Art*, for instance suspending Rodin between the Hebrew feminine 'ruach' and the finish of a marble surface in her astonishing last paragraphs. John Gage and I, headed by Elizabeth Sears, both tried and failed to confront the rather abstract or elevated considerations of the reading or misreading of positivism and Hume by Wind at the Potsdam conference that became *Edgar Wind: Kunsthistoriker und Philosoph* (Bredenkamp et al. 1998) with the political intensity of his refusal of Gombrich, and the ways in which this articulated his relation with English culture and Hume. Sears gave a marvellous plenary in which she demonstrated, amongst other questions, Wind's separation from being-German. She was preparing her edition of his unpublished essays as *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: Sistine Ceiling*, with her remarkable introduction to his thinking (Wind 2000, Sears 2000). Her work is fundamental to almost all Warburgian research and too prolific to list here, either in articles or on the Warburg Institute YouTube channel (see, for example, Sears, Seznec 2010, Sears 2013). At the same time the elliptically associated question of his refusing to think of himself as a German art historian embedded in a German tradition, something he shared with Rosenau, could not be placed in a reasoned discussion when the issue was one of recuperation. Anecdotally,

Margaret Wind, who was present, emphatically took our side in what became a dispute over ownership!

And both Wind and Rosenau felt, that whatever their international status, they were kept out of London by the deliberated tactics of Gombrich and the Warburg, and neither had the possibility of developing a school of their own, for rather different reasons, in the Universities of Oxford and Manchester. There was little infrastructure to support Wind's presence at Oxford – it was he who recommended me to leave if I wanted to become an art historian, while offering the possibility of an MA between just the two of us. Getting out of Oxford was also the suggestion strangely repeated by Hugh Trevor-Roper for reasons it would take me decades to unravel, and then by chance. One could not have imagined his hatred of Wind, finally unveiled in all its anti-Semitic tropes in his letters to Berenson – tropes echoed in Quentin Bell's comments on Arnoldus Noach, the Dutch refugee art historian at Leeds, who was to be my supervisor. How on earth did I overlook that for myself? (Trevor-Roper 2006, 191-193) The Berenson to whom Trevor-Roper was writing to was certainly not that of Ventrella's essay *Befriending Botticelli* (Ventrella 2019; for Bell's comments, see Bell 1995, 191-192). Noach had survived the war in hiding in Holland and, we now begin to discover, had been a broadcaster in the resistance. Scotford Lawrence, an old friend of his writing a memoir of Noach's life, attributes his incapacity to write to a traumatic fear of leaving any trace, something that Bell and Lawrence Gowing interpret as idleness, as not being able to 'get over' the war. He was an extraordinary intellectual whose doctorate had been on the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, rather as Rosenau's had been on the Kölner Dom a decade before (see Noach 1937; my thanks to Scotford for telling me of this). In terms of what I call the true Warburg method, of showing, not telling, Noach only ever suggested that I might read three books, none of which had anything to do with Ingres, my subject. We looked at books together, in his private library. That too is transmission.

Helen Rosenau was simply, as a woman and an outsider, treated as subaltern in her University, a scandal still awaiting full reparation, and who recalls E. M. Butler's superb essay in the second number of the "Warburg Journal"? (Butler 1938) Rosenau had no warmer feeling for the Warburg Institute than she did for Manchester. A reading of her correspondence

conserved in the London Archives of the Warburg Institute shows clearly that while, in her gallant and well-heeled youth she was at ease with her colleagues there, free to be a pioneer of Synagogue archaeology, to travel at will to Palestine, to drop in on Gershon Scholem in Jerusalem, exile led her to impoverishment and a separation from her potential that could not be fully healed. Working part time, teaching in worker and eventually Jewish education, her involvement in a subaltern social milieu is not the same as Saxl's admirable attempts to display Warburgian knowledges on a broader platform at that point in time – although Saxl's 'leftism' and pacifism suggests that his own relationship to Warburg in their early years is rather one of political opposites (see Russell 2012). In a note refusing to return some slides to the library, Rosenau, in the late 1930s, insists that her use for them for popular lectures is more urgent. In another context, while arguing about Wittkower's refusal to publish another of her articles in the *Journal*, never once does she mention her work with Mannheim at the London School of Economics, which was to result in the publication of *Woman and Art- from Type to Personality*. Yet this innovative and truly Warburgian exercise in activist feminism, in the presence of modern and modernist art, is surely one of its greatest achievements, despite its decades' long exclusion from the canon of 'proper' knowledge. And, in an important sense Mannheim's own essays are fundamental for the development of iconology. It is hard to think of it without his *On the Interpretation of the Weltanschauung* (1921). She engaged in active exile-resistance to the Nazi state and won a place on a priority death list drawn up by the Nazi government, alongside all the other major 'Warburgians': Wind, Saxl, Bing, Wittkower, Klibansky, and Kurz. The loop Mannheim/Panofsky/Rosenau/Mannheim is, alas, but a loop of fragments (the process of thinking Warburg and feminism begins with Iversen 1993, then Pollock 2014).



Cover and back cover of Helen Rosenau's *Woman in Art From Type to Personality*, 1944, 19 cm x 12 cm. With the kind permission of Michael and Louise Carmi, London.

So we have, I had, a sense of many long-term fissures and conflicts at each crossing of theoretical, aesthetic, social and political and gender differentiation, the micro history of an institution that never was. And – as a digression – I need to say that the Warburg Library itself only expresses its singularity in relation to other such institutions. Not so much with the simulacrum of Freud's in Hampstead, but its hollow shell at Berggasse 19, the crazed magnificence of Wagner's books at Wahnfried in Bayreuth, two other forms of the inner life of bourgeois man: the rational disorder of the London Library, the old hand catalogue at the British Museum in the rotunda, or the subject card catalogue in the basement of the

Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris before its move to the 13th *arrondissement*. All these are spaces and require forms of handwork as a part of looking (up) that force the random, experimental connectivity which is modelled in the *Bilderatlas*. In a sense in studying the Warburg Institute as a 'subject' we set aside that what it has had to offer us an endless bricolage, and we lose sight of the sense that, while the Atlas might 'predict' the internet, the latter does not wear the fingertips with dust and paper splits, nor offers the occasion when one must cut the odd page that has never heretofore been read. In his remarkable essay *The Warburg Library* (Bligh 2009; see also an aside in Rifkin 2011, 109-124) Bligh registers my own very first discomfort in passing under the inscription '*Otiosis hic locus non est...*', something oddly inappropriate for what had been a rich man's library and the disinterested pursuit of learning. It seems to forbid dreaming and putting off. It appears that it was chosen by Otto Kurz – who, of course was not from a wealthy background. For a consideration of the loss of the environment of the Arcades in the displacement of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, see Rifkin (2017).

Anyway, my second incipit expands this notion of irreconcilable differences. Why should this quotation from Bertrand Russell's memoirs,

which I too read when it came out, be conserved in Wind's archives? Again it's hard to say, but as I always placed Wind on the left of the political spectrum, his analysis of the angels and humans in the lower section of the London *Nativity* of Botticelli sounded like a left-humanism when I heard his classes (Wind 1980, 266). It resonated with a contemporary notion of democracy, an immediacy, strangely filtered through Savonarola and Botticelli's Dante drawings. The cutting from Russell then, draws a subtle attention to the critique of connoisseurialism as a social critique, a critique of luxury as a condition of learning (and Russell, of course, was Berenson's brother-in-law; see Samuels 1979). At the same time it lets us glimpse Russell's snobbery, albeit that he was a true and lifelong activist for social justice and world peace. But from the standpoint of a scholar whose own wealth had been of recent origin, and rapidly stripped from him in exile there is a discomfort to record. Much of the bitterness in Wind's exchanges with Saxl or Bing seem to arise from the question of salary as much as they do from this dismissal of their notion of the encyclopaedic as a form of closure. In this way he stands at an economic distance from Warburg's own social and aesthetic conservatism. Much of his life was spent in the international circuits of cultural modernism and it is the jouissance of that life that gives such energy to *Art and Anarchy*. It's something of an historical immensity to have had W.H. Auden dedicate a poem to you, however ironically critical (see Thomas 2015; Thomas 2021; see also Zorach 2007, which surprisingly overlooks Appendix 6 of Wind's *Pagan Mysteries*).

And while Lord Lee of Fareham and, more than anyone, Kenneth Clark, as an early English follower of Warburg himself, appreciated what they had taken on, the refugees and European exiles in general, I guess, did not so readily find a wider public for their forms of learning. Edgar Wind was a spectacular success as a lecturer in North America and Britain and one only has to listen to his 1960 Reith Lectures, *Art and Anarchy*, to be drawn into the ineffable beauty of his speaking, just as that of Richard Tauber's or Lotte Lehmann's singing drew sometimes a mass audience. Nikolaus Pevsner became the single most successful guide for the English to their 'own' culture, both as an adult educationalist, a writer of guides and a broadcaster and was perhaps the single most influential refugee in the arts – certainly for young people like me, just as Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1950) was an initiation to the idea of art history as such. We were hardly

'theoretically' equipped either to see what is wrong with it, or to suffer from its now evident shortcomings, nor did a fear of Pevsner's austerity prevent us from putting him beside John Betjeman. For a remarkable insight into Pevsner and British art and architectural culture, see Oléron Evans (2015) and Perry (2017), a radio lecture on Pevsner; here is an odd transmission as I was Grayson's undergraduate 'theory' tutor at Portsmouth Polytechnic.

So, taken in a different perspective, the culture of the exiles was, of course, a huge success. And were we to follow the possible lessons of the Atlas, we could be willing to expand our understanding of the visible to include Fritz Busch as a re-inventor of Mozart performance at Glyndebourne, then the substance can be developed to think of performance style alongside academic research, the address of the (Adolf) Busch quartet as a transformation of studio recording, or Rudolf Serkin's pianism as having an effect on the manner of English and American musical practice. And then too, by generation, what might we say of film makers, from Ernst Lubitsch who emigrated to develop his career in 1922 and invented the American musical; and, to name just a few other refugees here, Douglas Sirk, Robert Siodmak, Arnold Pressburger and Max Ophuls who transformed the moving image wherever they set down to work. The repetition of certain groups of gestures within sequences to make what I would call a 'sequence-gesture', frames made up of different spaces and physical movements in and through them in Ophuls, for example, is a kind of atlas of seeable emotion memories; while an early Lubitsch silent film such as *Sumrum* (1920) has such fantastic and complex montage of set elements in each shot, that the set loses its diegetic holding of the narrative to become something to be 'read', at the same time and in distinction to story or as distraction. The gap is inside the image. It would be perfect had Lubitsch's silent films been shown to the inmates at Kreuzlingen, for we could see that film form had no need to be predicted by the Atlas, the Atlas was rather a contemporary, a co-presence. Just as it would have been marvellous had Klaus Mann's narratives of gay cruising been mapped onto the actuality of sex and gender differences, alone substantiated in the work of Helen Rosenau.

For me, delving endlessly into the Warburg Institute archives is a riveting process of the construction of a microhistory, rather as if the methodology

were that of Carlo Ginzburg's – who, after all took Gombrich's side in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method...* starting for me in "History Workshop Journal" (1980). But it also feels like a straitjacket for the here and now, and if I learned anything from those researchers who were yet to become archive, it was to get on without them.

At the same time the finely pursued analyses of Warburg's famous dictum on the return to Athens from Alexandria underline for me another conflict, that within Hebraic studies and Jewish identifications in regards to a resistance to, or horror of, a dominant Ashkenazy-Germanic Jewish culture; to the pollution of reason by Sefardic irrationalism, of the assurance of living within the Indo-European tradition or to living with-out it. There is also a certain kind of queer Hellenism in Alexandria, in Longinus on Sappho, in its afterlife in Cavafy, that unsettles the reason for plunging into the dark side of the pagan mysteries and emerging intact. Again, I believe that the difference with Wind was that he understood the lesson of the *Serpent Ritual* as that of Hopi animism, not that of Warburg's method. His relation to his sources was like an animism, or a mythopoeic procedure – to evoke the still shadowy figure of Henri Frankfort (In relation to Frankfort's own work on Egyptian religion it is worth picking up an implied alliance with 'poor Frankfort' in Appendix 2 to *Pagan Mysteries*, which treats with Egyptian structures of Hellenistic thought; see also the interesting discussion in Didi-Huberman 2002, 61). Or in Warburg's own life, Athens was in truth the "desire of the other", in itself a dread, perhaps the dread of the mother tongue of the Classical tradition that left Semitic languages on the edge of the civilised. And, if Helen Rosenau saw that the Polish-German synagogue plan could not be the model, then Hannah Arendt's horror of the Östjuden and of the bazaar of middle eastern Jews when she went to Jerusalem for the Eichmann trial remains a more typical identification. For some general overview of these question and race in disciplinary languages, see Joseph (2012), Michaud (2015) and Demoule (2014); for Arendt's remarks, see Arendt (1992). It is worth reflecting on the absence of Italian refugees from the canon, the more so as Momigliano was a major contributor to Jewish histories (see Momigliano 1994, also Crawford et al. 2017). It's dreadful to report, but I did hear scholars refer to Gombrich's speech as '*Wienerdeutsch*', so the paradigm was internally fissured too. "Et méfiez vous surtout des autrichiens. (ils trichent)..." ("do

not trust the Austrians. (they cheat)...”), and while they included Saxl, Freud was somehow let off!

Yet again, to loop the loop, Wind’s *Observation on method* that concludes *Pagan Mysteries*, while perfectly reasonable, was the point at which I had, progressively, to part with him too – there was Umberto Eco on mediaeval aesthetics and *The Name of the Rose*, more and more Lévi-Strauss, not to mention a first and then a re-reading of Saussure and early Kristeva immediately to hand, in *Tel Quel*, as well as the rest of the world, Fanon, whatever. Later, much later, there is Paul Veyne on Paganism, in his *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien* (2007) and the paradigm is slewed as such in a Foucauldian dispositif, or his touching explication of the polymorphism of the classical in his *Palmyre* (2015).

To return to my incipits, the first concludes a series of letters to the London Review of Books that followed on from Charles Hope’s profoundly negative review of the posthumous collection of Edgar Wind’s *The Eloquence of Symbols* in 1984, in which he wrote:

The case of *The Feast of the Gods* is important for two reasons. First, it shows how easy it is, using an approach like Wind’s, to construct an entirely fictitious interpretation of a major Renaissance work of art, simply because the range of potentially relevant texts is so large and their relationship with the painted imagery so imprecise (Hope 1984).

Hope’s apparent dread of Wind’s rather wild and anti-positivist pragmatics, their pursuing almost Hegelian helices in never quite getting from one point to another, but enriching all our thinking and, indeed, a capacity to think as he did so, is pretty much inherited from Carlo Ginzburg’s pioneering article on Aby Warburg as well as E.H. Gombrich’s persnickety care to brush all the stray crumbs of speculation under the carpet when he ties up an argument. In that sense Hope adopts a position in the classical tradition that was to entitle him to direct the Warburg Institute from 2001 to 2010, but just the other day he replied to an email of mine to say that he had not been at the 1965 Oxford seminars with me and six others, but he had attended the Slade lectures the following year and that these had determined him to become an art historian. So there we are, you never can tell, we both decided to become art historians as a result of hearing Wind,

but in different circumstances and with different desires. I have only written one essay in the mode of classical philology — while, nonetheless, I fully subscribe to Ovid's fictions as a thought-form (Rifkin 2007).

Here I could add an arcane speculation, that is that when Wind concluded his letter to Seznec that he should hasten to find a good English classicist to head the Warburg Institute he could not get the idea off his mind. One buried link between the first and second editions of *Pagan Mysteries* is that, in the magnificent and breath-taking sixth appendix to the second there re-appears the name of just one of these men, that of E.R. Dodds, whose *Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), which has four footnotes in the first edition of *Pagan Mysteries*, was, perhaps, of underlying importance to him as a reaction to the collapse of the Aryan-classical tradition, and whose translation of the *Enneads* Wind again cites here (Wind 1980, 265), after four references in the first edition. That was where I had wished to start, but now it is where I round up.

Since then, I think, the achievements of complex and dangerous, risk taking archival showing and paratactical exposition of the best of Warburg and his followers have passed into contemporary curating rather than art history, the last decade of shows in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, or three of *Documenta*, especially *Documenta 12* of Ruth Noack and Roger Buergele. The current exhibition *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* is nothing if not a culmination of this work, made in a space where such 'showing' has been pioneered, a torrent of Atlas-like shows in which times and thoughts and documents and art works and rock music and the avant-garde jostle with your attention; somehow in exquisite after-life like resonance with Warburg's own mysterious *Fragments* (Warburg 2015). Some HKW Exhibitions: *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne. The Original* (September 4 – November 30, 2020); *Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present*, c. 1930; *Ape Culture* (April 30 – July 06, 2015); *The Whole Earth. California and the Disappearance of the Outside* (April 26 – July 7, 2013); *Animism* (March 16 – May 6, 2012).

Hic Salta.

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English abstract

This essay concerns being taught without knowing quite what it is that one has learned, or how I overheard the disputes and differences in the Warburg Institute before the archives became manifest. It is a reading of certain personalities as a history of achievement and disappointment, both on an unprecedented scale and of an enigmatic complexity.

keywords | Edgar Wind; Warburg Institute; Warburg-Kreis.



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