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## **After Warburg**

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ottobre 2020

# After Warburg

a cura di

Maurizio Ghelardi e Daniela Sacco



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# Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original. Eine Konflikt Geschichte

Interview with Roberto Ohrt on the exhibition in Berlin (September/November 2020)

by Bianca Maria Fasiolo



1 | "Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — The Original", Installation view © Silke Briel / HKW

On 4 September 2020, the exhibition "Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — The Original" opened at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The show, curated by Axel Heil and Roberto Ohrt, displays all the 63 panels of the 1929 version of the *Mnemosyne Bilderatlas* reconstructed using the original reproductions from the Photographic Collection of the Warburg Institute in London. In parallel, a folio volume has been published by Hatje Cantz, presenting the newly photographed panels of the Atlas. The exhibition is part of the New Alphabet Program, a biennial

interdisciplinary project focussing on alternative and marginalized learning practices and knowledge production.

We meet the curator Roberto Ohrt to discuss the development of the exhibition, the details regarding the Atlas' reconstruction, and the great effort put into realizing the publication.



2 | "Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — The Original"  
Installation view © Silke Briel / HKW



3 | Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, panel 39 (recovered). Photo: Wootton / fluid. Courtesy of The Warburg Institute, London

Bianca Maria Fasiolo | *The exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) and the publication of the folio, "Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — The Original" represent a significant step forward in comparison to your last show on the Atlas, "Aby Warburg. Mnemosyne Bilderatlas. Reconstruction — Commentary — Revision", at the ZKM (Center for Art and Media) in Karlsruhe in 2016 [see Engramma no. 139 for an interview on the 2016 exhibition, and Engramma no. 142 for a review by Cristina Baldacci and Clio Nicastro].*

Roberto Ohrt | Let's start by saying that back then, in 2016, the exhibition at the ZKM was a highly doubted project. In the beginning, the director, Peter Weibel, was the only one in the institution who not only believed in us but supported the mission that we wanted to achieve. When we inaugurated the show, luckily, it was a success. And I guess he was extremely relieved. "Now, I am rehabilitated", he later told me.

B.M. F. | *Such a show can represent a challenge for these big institutions. Are they also uncertain about the reception of the show?*



R. O. | Yes, and I understand why. It's not a typical exhibition, and there are some problems related to it. First of all, it is about the Renaissance. Everyone has a specific image of it as an 'era' that is not at all presented here. Warburg does not focus on the Renaissance as we know it, but on the breakthrough moment that created it. I call this '*Konflikt Geschichte*' (a History of Conflicts). Warburg is showing us the conflicts which made it possible. Also, consider that what we see in the panels is the early, rather than the high Renaissance. In the *Atlas*, only two panels show Raphael: Panel 54, the *School of Athens*, and in Panel 56, there we find Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*. That's all the high Renaissance in the *Atlas*. It is more or less in the end when Warburg is commenting on how, from Mantegna to Dürer, the Renaissance is wandering back to Northern Europe. It's quite the opposite of what is happening from panel 30 to 39 when Italian artists were struggling with the success of old Flemish painting at the beginning of the 15th century all over Europe. Even the Medici were collecting Flemish painting at that time. So we see the conflicts of how the Italian artists could find a position in such circumstances, dealing with figures like Van Eyck and, for example, Hugo van der Goes.

And that is only one issue related to our show at the HKW in Berlin. Another one is that the *Atlas* was made ninety years ago. Everyone asks us why we organize the exhibition now. One answer could be: should we wait another ninety years? The *Mnemosyne* undertaking was very problematic after Aby Warburg's death in 1929. First, for Gombrich, and later for the whole Warburgian community. Following Gombrich, academia always refused to take the *Atlas* seriously, considering it unimportant. And that has only changed over the last twenty years. As I often say, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* is more famous than known. It is a legend, but nobody knows exactly why.

B.M. F. | *Why, after the ZKM, did you decide to propose the exhibition to an institution like the HKW? It was your idea to propose it, right?*

R. O. | Yes, I suggested it without anything in my hands. I was co-curating an exhibition at the HKW about the Situationists, and since I was already there, I pulled the idea for the show on the *Atlas* out of my pocket. The director Bernd Scherer immediately said, "Yes!" I didn't have to persuade him too much.

B.M. F. | *Bernd Scherer presented Warburg as a 'Bilderleser' (image reader), a seismograph of his time, and a revolutionary for his way of conceiving art history. It is also interesting to note that the show is exhibited in the broader framework of the New Alphabet Program. How do you think the presentation of the Atlas is linked to this initiative?*

R. O. | It's embedded in the program. To read the Atlas, one has to learn its language. When we first started to investigate the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* in our research group at 8. Salon in Hamburg, we began to slowly understand how to read it. We needed to find a method for reading the constellation of images, especially because not many direct explanations of it were given. Of course, we had many notes and writings from Warburg, Gertrude Bing, Fritz Saxl, and others from the KBW (Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg) to help us figure out the interpretation of the individual pictures. But to understand the constellation itself, we had to delve into the details, to understand how and why each image occupies a specific position. And this develops slowly, precisely, like when learning a language. Now that we know this language, we can navigate through it even if we don't always comprehend each individual panel at first sight.

Let's take the images on Panel 39, for instance. Why is there one Pallas Athena on the right side while all the other Pallas Athenas are on the left? Reading from the right, we first see the Pallas as a rational figure with the olive branch in her hand and 'Abundantia' in the middle as, let's say, a fruitful symbol. Then on the left, there is Daphne, who is disappearing into nature. Here, Pallas Athena reappears. Why? We can try to make sense of it, putting her in relation to the Centaur, being half nature, and in opposition to Zephyr, who is taking Chloris in the image above. Athena is depicted here next to the Centaur, in a power reversal of what is happening to Chloris in the *Primavera*. We think this is the way Warburg constructed polarized contradictions, turnarounds and inversions.

B.M. F. | *A visual language to be understood.*

R. O. | We have to consider that Warburg, at some point, was talking about two thousand pictures for the entire *Atlas*. Now, as a fragment, there are only 971 (to choose a number), but initially, they were supposed to be

more. Before, the emphasis would have been on the images. I can imagine that a short written presentation about themes and subjects would have been provided for each panel, but it was essentially a confrontation with images. He wanted to argue through and with pictures.

B.M. F. | *Let's talk about the title of the exhibition and the folio, Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — The Original, edited by yourself and Axel Heil and published by Hatje Cantz. What do you mean, in the framework of your research, by 'original'?*

R. O. | Maybe you have misunderstood me. You could say, "We are confronted only with reproductions, why do you call them 'originals'?" That's the wrong question. The word 'original' can be used not only in connexion to original artworks but to the idea and structure of the whole undertaking. I'm emphasizing 'The Original' because what we did was to reconstruct the thing that Warburg had in his hands and used, even in parts. For the first time, we now have it in front of us in its entirety. When we started our research, we always asked ourselves, "Where did the 'original' *Atlas* materials go? Where is the stuff?" We knew the whole library was brought to London. And so we were wondering why the *Atlas* was not there. What happened to it? We were told more than once that it was gone.

Shortly before the ZKM exhibition, I traveled to London to research in the photographic collection of The Warburg Institute. I wanted to clarify my doubts about some captions related to the Fortuna Panels. While browsing the files, I kept coming across the original reproductions that Warburg used in the *Atlas*. I also had a problem with a little illustration that was identified by the Daedalus Group as 'John of Padmos'. I could not understand why Warburg used it there. So by chance, while looking for it, I came across the Astrology file. I found a lot of other original reproductions there. Suddenly, way down in the file, I spotted the little illustration. I turned it over, and it was called 'The Astrologist'. The Daedalus caption led me in the wrong direction — but this discovery was the key!

At the HKW, we are only showing one work, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*. And this we call 'The Original'. There have been many exhibitions with the *Atlas* using reproductions as image form, starting with the Daedalus Group in 1993 in Hamburg, then in Vienna, then Italy, and so forth. [n.d.r.: On

the exhibition in Venice, in 2004, edited by Seminario Mnemosyne, see the monographical issue “Engramma no. 35, *Mnemosyne a Venezia*”]. We also did our shows in St. Gallen, Munich, Florence, and finally, at the ZKM, with black and white reproductions. Now, in Berlin in 2020, we have the *Atlas* in its original form in a folio and an exhibition — hence, ‘The Original’.



4 | The photographic collection of the Warburg Institute in London. Courtesy of Roberto Ohrt

B.M. F. | *So, if I understand well, most of what you show is original in the sense that you found it in the photographic collection or the archive. What have you done with the images that you couldn't find in the archive or borrow for the exhibition?*

R. O. | Well, for example, there are some originals from F. Lippmann, *Drawings by Albrecht Dürer*, 7 vols. (Berlin: G. Grote, 1883-1929), the large set of folios from the beginning of the last century. It was the highest, best quality available at the time. Warburg had the books unbound to put some of the original pages on the panels. Now that the books are rebound, we cannot take the pages out again. Instead, we realized high resolution photos and created facsimiles in the perfect colors and tones, to come as close as possible to the original reproductions from the books, which we could not use.

Consider that we only had a few weeks at The Warburg Institute to find as many images as possible, and there are more than 400,000 in the photographic collection. Understanding all the keywords and catchphrases under which the photos were archived is complicated. There is a 60-page index. You can't even imagine how many different terms there are, or in some cases, how playful they are. In one case, I found an original by

chance. We couldn't find any pictures of a 'Madrid tapestry' that depicts a shipwreck with Odysseus, Neptune, and Venus. Together with Lorenza Gay and Axel Heil, we tried checking all the categories—Neptune, Venus, etc.—a second, even a third time, but never found it. I finally found it in the François Fénelon folder, named after a French writer in the 18th century. He wrote the story of Telemachos, and the tapestry was filed under his name because he was the author.

Given that, we are still missing 10 percent of the original images, which may yet be somewhere in the big sea of the 400,000, under some very strange catchphrase. Given some more time or accidentally, we (or others) could probably find them. But we had to finish our work at some point. With 80 percent of the images, we felt we were close enough to say we had reassembled the original. The remaining 10 percent of the missing pictures are either lost, destroyed, or were loaned and never returned. For example, the Rembrandt section has a higher rate of images that we didn't find until now. These obviously belonged to a separate archive. Only some of them went into the photographic collection, while some others were borrowed by Saxl and other scholars and never returned.



5 | Aby Warburg, *Bilderschatz Mnemosyne — The Original* (2020), Panel 37, captions (left page)

B.M. F. | *How did you realize the reproductions for the 10 percent you couldn't find?*

R. O. | It was a longer process in which we produced facsimiles at the fluid studio in Karlsruhe. First, we compared all the data we had collected over the years in our own one-to-one reproduction from 2016. Then we could give them the right measurements by comparison, and in some cases, as we could not know if they originally had a brownish or blueish tone, we just kept them neutral, but used the best possible photographic quality.

B.M. F. | *Are the passe-partouts original?*

R. O. | You can identify the original passe-partouts by the rounded corners. We reproduced the lost ones as close to the original color as possible. We did not want to imitate the display technique. It may not be perfect, because with 971 images, you can't control everything.

B.M. F. | *Let's focus now on the folio. How did you take the photos of the panels?*

R. O. | We brought our photography team from Karlsruhe, Tobias Wootton and Adrienne Wilson, who installed a digital full frame medium format camera in the lecture room of The Warburg Institute. Over five days, we reconstructed every panel and photographed it at one-to-one scale. On the basis of these images and our own database, we composited the print files which resulted in a one-to-one digital reproduction of every panel of the *Atlas*.

B.M. F. | *Which is the scale of the folio?*

R. O. | The folio pages are 61 x 44 cm, which is approximately one-third of the panels, which are 150 x 125 cm.

B.M. F. | *What about the printing phase of the Atlas?*

R. O. | The folio is in itself a hybrid of different techniques. Every photo on the panel has been optimized for maximum readability, which was necessary for printing at this size and quality. So when we had faded or damaged images, we retouched them or incorporated additional data. It is worth mentioning that the printing quality is exceptional because we used a printing technique called Crystal Raster, which is built up on an aleatoric system. This makes it possible to use the magnifying glass and still not perceive the image's printed structure. You do not get lost in the dots. It sounds like a contradiction, but since the dots are diffuse, the sharpness is maintained until the very last detail.

B.M. F. | *One of the catalog's significant features is the left-hand pages, where some of the panel images are enlarged. Which is the function of these left pages, and how did you create the selection of the highlighted details?*

R. O. | As we have become familiar with the material over many years, we could do this very quickly, and had a lot of fun with it. We wanted to emphasize certain details where the viewer could concentrate and follow the crucial parts of some images which at first glance, may not fit in the context of the panel. This close reading could also be considered a general guide to understanding the language of the Atlas — by searching for and finding the details.

B.M. F. | *In the introduction to the book Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — The Original (you co-edited with Axel Heil), you write that this version of the Atlas will slightly undermine the feeling of a homogeneous work and reinforce the idea of a so-called 'Zettelwirtschaft' (roughly translated: 'a paper chaos'), a definition often used by Warburg's critics to downplay his work. Could you explain in more detail what do you mean by that?*

R. O. | Actually, that is one of the results of our research. When confronted with the final result, I realized that we had taken a step backward. Looking at the newly reassembled panels, everyone would now say that this is 'a monumental *Zettelwirtschaft*', just like Warburg's detractors said. That is exactly why Gombrich decided to reject the whole project, claiming that it was confusing and, ultimately, unfruitful. I think we have to go back to the beginning of such a misunderstanding and consider the Atlas as a monumental *Zettelwirtschaft* — to flip it around, to use the descriptive term in a strictly positive way — to put ourselves in the position of accepting it for exactly what it is. But that also means that we have to take the chosen form seriously. In Warburg's way the 'Zettelwirtschaft' offers and represents a precise and dense array of constellations and therefore shows a specific form of knowledge preservation. That is the *Atlas*' specific character and promise.

Now that the *Atlas* has the appearance of a playful sketch again, it will trigger the idea of a flexible tool even more. Every time we present the *Atlas*, one of the visitors' first reactions is to imagine how they could play with the constellation by moving the images. It is always surprising to us. And it reflects the current major challenge in our own conception of the *Atlas* as a model for observing 'the power of images' in the Freedbergian sense. To investigate the *Atlas*, even in this state, as a serious and precise construction.

B.M. F. | *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne was conceived by its author to ultimately become a publication. A uniform object in black and white. I wonder if your reconstruction doesn't risk to fetishize the Atlas in one of its development phases.*

R. O. | 'Fetishization'. We received this critique already. It is a helpless reaction in front of this unbelievable, wonderful, original reconstruction. We assume it comes from the impression one has when looking at the originals and the aesthetic qualities they bring with them. For some, the *Atlas* seems to have an aura, like an artwork. And, you know, it shouldn't have that aura, because all we present here are reproductions of artworks. We never wanted to stylize Aby Warburg as an artist, and he, for sure, never felt like one. The exhibition and the folio are not about 'fetish'. There is no religion. What we show is not what Warburg was aiming for — it is the form of presentation we have chosen to make his way of thinking comprehensible. We do not know of any plans for an exhibition of the panels, and especially not in the exhibition circus we today have and are part of. What we show is a state of research. That is the only thing we can do, but we take it as a serious, important, fruitful instrument.

B.M. F. | *You started your research in 2012, as a mostly independent and self-financed work. The 2020 show and publication are supported by the HKW. Could you tell us some more about the history of the folio's financing?*

R. O. | When the HKW agreed on our proposal in 2018 to show the *Atlas* with its original reproductions, it was clear for all of us, that we were embarking on a project of remarkable scope and ambition. With great commitment, the HKW assured not only the realization of a technically excellent exhibition but also the high quality production of the folio. But before starting to work with HKW on the exhibition, we were entirely on our own. From our independent research to the major part of the folio's pre-production. Including also all the people on our team, all self-initiated contributors.

B.M. F. | *To conclude, a short reflection about the reception of the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne. You often underline how your research on the Atlas triggers artists' attention in the first place. Your shows of the Atlas*



*have been hosted, at least in Germany, by institutions that focus mostly on contemporary art, media theory, and interdisciplinary research. Starting a dialogue with art historians and art history museums was way more complicated. Could you imagine why there is such a discrepancy, considering the subject of your research? And does this exhibition have the potential to change this situation?*

R. O. | That has to do with the concerns linked to the Atlas from the very beginning, starting from Warburg's death in 1929 onwards. In the exhibition here in Berlin, we present *Mithras*, a book by Fritz Saxl, which already showed his talent in creating lines of images. His layout is extremely well constructed, but it is a linear reading. Saxl, like Gombrich, may have struggled to cope with the Atlas because of its nonlinear, mind-mapping-like structure, which simultaneously allows different reading methods. With very few exceptions, most scholars who later researched Warburg's ideas and writings never really focused on the *Atlas*. The *Mnemosyne* project was too complex, too ambivalent, too futuristic — very modern. There is no straight line, not a linear beginning, and, as a given fragment, no end. And artists see that immediately. For them, it seems familiar. In a way, Warburg shows us the artist's workshop, her/his use of different sources, and how they come together. We know that from the end of the 19th Century, artists were collecting printed reproductions, also from the mass media, forming constellations of several pictures, and selecting them to generate a new image. I think that in the Atlas, there is a resonance with the artistic way of using constellations, arranging and rearranging as a purpose that has no end. It's the artistic side of the academic process.

B.M. F. | *Do you think that through your operation, the attention for the Atlas could also increase within the art history community?*

R. O. | I hope so. That is one of our aims. In Germany, there was never so much attention on the Atlas, especially in the community of the so-called Warburgians. That was more or less one of the reasons why we started working on it, aside from our own curiosity and fascination. Nobody was really doing a complete analysis of the Atlas, so this was a 'zone libre' where we could walk. We could make our mistakes and stupid tries,

nobody was watching us, nobody was controlling us. We felt free in our own world to make this research ours.

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### **English abstract**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, the exhibition *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original* opened at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The show, curated by Axel Heil and Roberto Ohrt, displays all 63 panels from the 1929 version of the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne reconstructed using the original reproductions from the Photographic Collection of the Warburg Institute in London. In parallel, a folio volume has been published by Hatje Cantz, which presents the newly photographed panels of the Atlas. The exhibition is part of the New Alphabet Program, a biennial interdisciplinary project focussing on alternative and marginalized learning practices and knowledge production.

*keywords* | Aby Warburg; Mnemosyne Atlas; exhibition Berlin 2020.



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