Aby Warburg
Exhibiting Thinking
Roman Kurzmeyer, 2022

The French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) drew his first sketches for the work *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (1915–1923), these days better known as *Le Grand Verre,* in 1913. Working in his Paris studio that same year he produced his first readymade: *Roue de bicyclette* (1913), and with it Western art's first kinetic sculpture.[1] Another milestone of 1913 was the Armory Show in New York, an exhibition of modern art from all over the world organised by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors that opened on the evening of 17th February. Duchamp had four works in the show: *Le Roi et la reine entourés des nus vites* (1912), *Portrait de joueurs d'échecs* (1911), *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912) and *Nu* (1912).[2] The show set out to give a broad audience its first taste of American and European avant-garde art, especially of Cubism, which at the time was virtually unknown in the United States. Posters for the show described the European exhibitors as 'guests', though only a few of them were actually named by name. Duchamp was not one of them, however. The French artist counted among the less well-known of the young European participants; yet his *Nu descendant un escalier* painted the year previously attracted considerable attention, with the painting itself and even more so the title prompting both heated debate and ridicule. Even Duchamp's brothers and fellow participants, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Jacques Villon, were better known and more successful than he was at the time. Yet while Henri Matisse met with rejection because his painting was felt to be aggressive and even hideous, visitors flocked to Duchamp's mysterious painting with its seductive-sounding title.

A few days after the opening, on 2nd March 1913, the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* published an illustrated review featuring a short article titled 'Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination' by the Hamburg art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg (1866–1929).[3] In it, Warburg writes about two large Flemish tapestries dating from the fifteenth century, which he hypothesizes were made in northern Europe and taken to Italy soon afterwards. The two tapestries depict scenes from the life of Alexander the Great and what interests Warburg is above all *how* they do this. He names possible sources and quotes extensively from a retelling of the ancient Alexander myth in a manuscript by Jean Wauquelin, court scribe to Philip the Good, one of the fifteenth-century Dukes of Burgundy. Warburg describes how one of the tapestries combines state-of-the-art siege artillery and the contemporary dress worn at the Burgundian court with the ancient tale of Alexander's ascent to heaven in a metal cage pulled by four griffins as well as his experimental dive in a glass tub. The scholar's learned, but unacademic interpretation takes account not just of the aforementioned literary source, but also of current

1 Cf. Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, London 1997, esp. pp. 116–42.

2 Cf. Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, New York 1988, esp. pp. 133ff. and 264–5.

3 Aby M. Warburg, 'Luftschiff und Tauchboot in der mittelalterlichen Vorstellungswelt' (1913), in Aby Warburg, *Werke in einem Band.* Auf der Grundlage der Manuskripte und Handexemplare herausgegeben und kommentiert von Martin Treml, Sigrid Weigel und Perdita Ladwig. Unter Mitarbeit von Susanne Hetzer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink und Christina Oberstebrink, Berlin 2010, pp. 415–23. The essay was included in the collected writings of 1932: Aby Warburg, *Die Erneuerung der Heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance*, ed. by Gertrud Bing, Leipzig/Berlin 1932 (= Gesammelte Schriften, ed. by the Bibliothek Warburg, vol. 1), pp. 241–9.

research findings on the art, social and economic history of the Renaissance. He judges the tapestry from the Palazzo Doria-Pamphili in Rome to be a 'revealing document of the evolution of historical consciousness in the age of the revival of classical antiquity in Western Europe'.[4] Espying in it 'here in the North the desire to recall the grandeur of antiquity', he concludes that what he calls the 'Burgundian Antique' – i.e. that period in which Wauquelin was working for the court – 'had a role of its own to play in the creation of modern man, with his determination to conquer and rule the world.'[5]

A German scholar of the Italian early Renaissance

Aby Warburg, the scion of a Jewish family of bankers, lived as a private scholar in Hamburg, where in 1905 he founded the Warburg-Bibliothek für Kulturwissenschaft, a library for cultural studies that he would finance with family funds his whole life long.[6] Hamburg in those days had an art museum, the Kunsthalle, but would not have a university of its own until 1919. Warburg began pondering the idea of transforming his Warburg-Bibliothek into an institute shortly before the outbreak of the First World War and on 27th December 1915 used a private lecture at his own home to acquaint a small group of visiting art historians from Berlin with the planned project. His lecture notes contain possible names for the new institution, including 'Institut für Ausdruckskunde' ('Institute for Expression Studies') and 'Institut für methodische Grenzerweiterung' ('Institute for the Methodological Pushing of Boundaries').[7] Not until 1925–26, by which time he had spent several years in Ludwig Binswanger's sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, did Warburg have a purpose-built library erected next to his house in Hamburg, in which he had hitherto kept his vast collection of books. This new Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (K.B.W.) was built according to plans by the architect Gerhard Langmaack and was a modern library building with its own lecture theatre and state-of-the-art technology. This is where Warburg henceforth housed his collection of nearly 50,000 books along with countless documents and photographs, all of which would henceforth be freely accessible to scholars. The library's series of lectures and publications was launched during Warburg's long absence, when at his family's request his assistant Fritz Saxl (1890–1948) had taken over the running of the library. Upon his return from Kreuzlingen in 1924, Warburg began work on a compilation of images for his *Mnemosyne Atlas,* a book project that was to present the sum of all his research work to date.

Warburg had studied Art History, History and Archaeology in Bonn, and had originally wanted to do his PhD there under the art historian Carl Justi. When Justi refused, he went to Strasbourg instead, where in 1892 he was awarded a doctorate for his dissertation 'Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring.* An Investigation of How Antiquity Was Imagined in the Early Renaissance', supervised by Hubert Janitschek. Warburg's stays in Florence became longer and longer right up to 1902. In 1895 he travelled to the USA, initially to

4 Warburg 1913 (see note 3), p. 421; English quoted from Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, translated by David Britt, Los Angeles 1999, p. 337.

5 Ibid.

6 Cf. Robert Galitz and Brita Reimers (eds.), *Aby M. Warburg, 'Ekstatische Nymphe ... trauernder Flussgott': Portrait eines Gelehrten*, Hamburg 1995; and most recently Kurt W. Forster, *Aby Warburgs Kulturwissenschaft: Ein Blick in die Abgründe der Bilder*, Berlin 2018.

7 WIA (Warburg Institute Archive, London), III. 88.7.1., sheet 5, 'Institut für methodische Grenzüberschreitung', lecture on 27th December 1915 to members of the Berlin Art History Seminar at Heilwigstrasse 114, incl. notes by those present, including Goldschmidt, Pauli, Westphal, Heise, Kauffmann and Panofsky, MS, 33 fols.

the East Coast and then to the West Coast and New Mexico, where during a memorable stay with the Hopi people he recorded their everyday lives in photographs. In the years thereafter, right up to the outbreak of war and his mental breakdown, Warburg concentrated on collecting books, discoursing on educational policy in Hamburg and on his own scholarly work, which was scarcely heeded outside a small circle of university art historians. He was not yet the founder of iconology as we know him today, but rather an upper-class German scholar, who devoted most of his time and attention to Italian Renaissance art.

Warburg and Duchamp

The two Flemish tapestries that Warburg discussed in his 1913 article for the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* had caught his eye at a reception held in the Palazzo Doria-Pamphili in Rome during the 10th International Congress of Art History in 1912. At that congress, which he had helped organise, he gave a talk on 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia of Ferrara', in which he demonstrated what he understood by 'iconological analysis that can range freely, with no fear of border guards, and that can treat the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds as a coherent historical unity – an analysis that can scrutinize the purest and the most utilitarian of arts as equivalent documents of expression'.[8] The question he had set out to answer was as follows: 'What does the influence of the ancient world signify for the artistic culture of the early Renaissance?'[9] Not until his final years and his work of 1924–29 on the *Mnemosyne Atlas* that he would never finish did he turn his attention to his own period and to the influence of Antiquity on the Modern Age, even if that question had indeed been present in his earlier works – at least to those who could read between the lines. His essay 'Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination', which as already mentioned concerned itself with the revival of the Alexander myth at the Burgundian court, thus ends with a surprising reference to modern aviation: 'It seems to me by no means far-fetched to tell the modern aviator, as he considers the "up-to-the-minute" problem of motor-cooling systems, that his intellectual pedigree stretches back in line direct – by way of Charles the Bold, trying to cool the burning feet of his heaven-storming griffins with wet sponges – to *le grand Alixandre*.'[10]

As mentioned at the outset, Warburg's essay and Duchamp's first readymade were produced in the same year. We do not know whether Warburg knew any works by Duchamp. While as an art historian he was interested in the influence of Antiquity up to and including the Renaissance, as a private individual he was well acquainted with more recent and even contemporary art. We know of his interest in a painting by Wilhelm Leibl, for example, from a quote for the same sent to him by Paul Cassirer on 12th January 1907.[11] Yet only towards the end of his life, when he was studying Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) for his *Mnemosyne Atlas,* did he reflect on modern art in his scholarly work as well. Warburg's letters tell of his visits to both the exhibition of Auguste Pellerin's Manet collection at Paul Cassirer's gallery in Berlin in 1910

8 Aby Warburg, 'Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara' (1912), in Warburg 2010 (see note 3), p. 396; English quoted from Warburg 1999 (see note 4), p. 585.
9 Ibid., p. 373.
10 Warburg 1913 (see note 3), p. 422; English quoted from Warburg 1999 (see note 4), p. 337.

and the Manet show at the Galerie Matthiesen in Berlin of 1928.[12] On 1st July 1912 he wrote a letter to the editorial office of *Der Sturm,* the art magazine founded by Herwarth Walden in 1910. Walden had mounted an exhibition of the Italian Futurists Umberto Boccioni, Carlo D. Carrà, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini that after being shown at his eponymous gallery in Berlin from 12th April to 31st May 1912 travelled on to other German cities, including in Hamburg in July of that same year. This is the show that Warburg critiqued in his aforementioned letter to the organisers: 'As an art historian who is very interested in the Futurists' problems', he wrote, 'I would like to bring it to your notice that the circumstances in which the exhibition was shown here [in Hamburg] fall woefully short of even the most basic requirements, making it much harder for visitors to find the right vantage point. No one has even bothered to hang the large canvases properly. They are simply propped on the floor and, worst of all, leaning against a ghastly, dirty-yellow wallpaper that jars horribly with the green-papered skirting board, so that the works of art are not even accorded a neutral background. It is greatly to be regretted that when installing this exhibition, not even the minimum of consideration was given to its Hamburg audience.'[13] When the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* published an article containing a wholesale rejection of modernism in 1917, Warburg wrote to its editor-in-chief, Felix von Eckardt, and demanded 'respect for those who are striving for a distant, invisible goal'.[14] These two excerpts from Warburg's letters are telling, not only because they prove that Warburg was indeed informed about contemporary art and even visited exhibitions of the same, but perhaps even more importantly because in them he expresses an interest not just in the works themselves, but also in how they were being presented.

Aby Warburg and Marcel Duchamp approached the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art from opposite directions: the one as an art historian, the other as an artist.[15] These days, the name Marcel Duchamp is associated with an artistic strategy for the decontextualization of objects, ideas and actions under museum conditions. Warburg, by contrast, detached the work of art from the museum context and through recourse to all the knowledge at his disposal placed it in a new context. He was convinced that every major work of art is not just an expression of the form and narrative intended by the artist, but also a bearer of individual, cultural and anthropological patterns. This ambivalence is what fascinated him about works of art. In one of his most famous analogies, for example, he saw in a photograph of a woman playing golf 'the catharsis of the female head-hunter'.[16] This synchronicity of the asynchronous posed a problem for a culture bound to a linear understanding of time and history.

This was the cultural situation out of which Europe's modernists began to question historical works of art and create completely new ones of their own.

11 Cf. in WIA, GC (General Correspondence), the letter from Paul Cassirer to Aby Warburg, 12th January 1907.

12 Cf. in WIA, FC (Family Correspondence), the letter from Warburg to Mary Warburg, 1st April 1910, and to Fritz Saxl, 16th April 1928.

13 WIA, GC, the letter from Warburg to the editorial office of *Der Sturm*, Berlin, 1st July 1912.

14 Cf. in WIA, GC, the letter from Warburg to Felix von Eckardt, 11th January 1917.

15 Werner Hofmann had previously drawn attention to the affinity between Warburg's understanding of the image and that of Duchamp in his essay 'Die Menschenrechte des Auges', in Werner Hofmann, Georg Syamken and Martin Warnke, *Die Menschenrechte des Auges: Über Aby Warburg*, Frankfurt a. M. 1980, pp. 102–4.

16 *Mnemosyne Bilderatlas*, pl. 77, in Aby Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. by Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink, Berlin 2000 (= Gesammelte Schriften [Studienausgabe], vol. 2,1); English quoted from Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick (eds.), *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, Princeton 2013, p. 320.

Harald Szeemann read Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl while writing his dissertation at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in the late 1950s.[17] He had almost certainly encountered Warburg prior to that through his professor at the University of Bern, Hans R. Hahnloser (1899–1974). Hahnloser had written his own doctoral dissertation on the thirteenth-century artist Villard de Honnecourt under Julius von Schlosser (1866–1938) in Vienna and in 1934 had published the 'sketchbook' of drawings for which Villard is now famous and so brought it to the attention of a much broader audience.[18] The manuscript is one of the rare source works for Gothic building practice to have survived and contains architectural drawings as well as depictions of building techniques and tools. Von Schlosser, to whom Hahnloser remained close right up to the former's death, was also familiar with the works of his Hamburg colleague Aby Warburg. Both were interested less in the formal history of style espoused by the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin and instead understood art history as a discipline concerned with the history of culture generally entailing the study of original sources. Also noteworthy in the context under discussion here are von Schlosser's early contributions to the field of museology, specifically his 1908 treatise, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* ('The Cabinets and *Wunderkammer* of the Late Renaissance: A Contribution to the History of Collecting') and his study of portraits of deceased monarchs and the magic powers attributed to them: *Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs* of 1911. Like his coeval Warburg, he was pursuing lines of inquiry that in those days lay outside what was then deemed to be the proper purview of art history. Both Warburg's own PhD supervisor Janitschek and Fritz Saxl belonged to the Viennese school of art history, whose leading figure in those days was von Schlosser.

In her foreword to Warburg's collected writings published in 1932, the editor Gertrud Bing (1892–1964) attaches great importance to Warburg's efforts 'to overcome the isolation of the work of art as a risk attendant on its contemplation in purely aesthetic and formal terms, and from the study of single objects to gain an insight into visual and literary documents and how they complement each other, relations between artist and patron, how the work is connected to its social context and its practical purpose'.[19] Warburg's field of study, she wrote, comprised 'not only the products of great art, but also more remote and aesthetically irrelevant visual documents'.[20] It was this understanding of art history as social and cultural history, an approach that connected von Schlosser's school of art history with that of Warburg, that was to shape Szeemann's work as a curator right from the start. Even as director of Kunsthalle Bern, he showed not just solo and group shows, but also thematic exhibitions, some of which – *Science Fiction* (1967) springs to mind – took visitors into the outer reaches of art and beyond. When Szeemann was appointed secretary general of documenta 5 in 1970, he and his curatorial team conceived an exhibition which, unlike previous documentas, would not confine itself to the presentation of art alone, but which, following his much broader definition of art, would embrace both the current art scene and visual culture of all kinds.

17 Interview of Tobia Bezzola and Roman Kurzmeyer with Harald Szeemann, 18th March 1996. Transcription in the author's own archive.

18 Hans R. Hahnloser, *Villard de Honnecourt. Kritische Gesamtausgabe des Bauhüttenbuches ms. fr 19093 der Pariser Nationalbibliothek*, Vienna 1935.

19 Gertrud Bing, 'Vorwort', in Warburg 1932 (see note 3), p. xi.

20 Ibid.

His exhibitions on the history of culture unfurled and visualised the theses underlying them with works of art that might or might not have a place in the canon, and it was this that made them so refreshing, so unique, and in many cases so influential for subsequent discourse on the subject. This is especially true of *Junggesellenmaschinen / Les Machines Célibataires* (1975), *Monte Verità / Berg der Wahrheit* (1978) and *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Europäische Utopien seit 1800* (1983). Even the 'pure art' shows that did not have any overarching theme of relevance to the history of culture were sometimes staged so that the visual interplay of different works in space defined viewers' perception of them, but in such a way that they retained that specific appearance that allowed them to be seen and experienced as works of art in their own right. The series of sculptural exhibitions that began with *Spuren, Skulpturen und Monumente ihrer präzisen Reise* at Kunsthaus Zürich in 1985 belong to this type of show.

Szeemann already had many years of curatorial work under his belt when, in 1988, he was invited by the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam to curate an exhibition drawing on the museum's own collections. In the catalogue accompanying that show, he recalled his Museum of Obsessions, arguing that 'the fear of transgressing borders in vertical, compartmentalized historical thought can be overcome by a manifest art history of sensitivity towards the intensive intentions of the works of all times, in the form of visualised, non-historical dimensions'.[21] By definition, the Museum of Obsessions was not a museum of art history; nor was it a picture gallery or a physical place like the museum in Rotterdam from whose collections he was to select works for his temporary exhibition. Like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the Museum of Obsessions was rather a conceptual figure, a speculative idea in the sense of Alfred Jarry's '*pataphysique*. Not unlike Warburg's picture atlas, at least methodologically speaking, it was to represent everything and for that same reason was to remain an unrealised 'attempt to resolve all dialectics in its intention and its intensity'.[22] The exhibition project in Rotterdam prompted further reflection on art history as represented in art museums. Szeemann wrote of his admiration for 'the structural analysis of a Sedlmayr and the iconology of a Panofsky. They made us aware of the wealth of emotion and content in historical works of art, became part of our collective knowledge of artistic creation in and out of a specific period, and thus created new categories of evaluation. Arranging works in a space today, however, is invariably a matter of personal sensibility: a historical image, too, is a modern transmitter or merely a document.'[23] The title Szeemann chose for his guest appearance with works from the Rotterdam museum's own collections was *a-Historische klanken* / *a-Historical Soundings.*[24] On show were works of art, furniture and design from various periods. The first room of the exhibition was about 'the confusion of the spirits, the living appeal to the human creative urge, suffering and death', while the second was devoted to 'the wondrous silence of emptiness and monochromaticism'.

21 Harald Szeemann, *a-Historische klanken / a-Historical soundings. De keuze van Harald Szeemann uit de collecties van Museum Boymans-van Beuningen / Harald Szeemann's choice from the collections of the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum,* Museum Boymans-van Beuningen Rotterdam, 1988. The original German text is printed in Harald Szeemann, *Zeitlos auf Zeit – Das Museum der Obsessionen*, Regensburg 1994, pp. 52–6.

22 Harald Szeemann, 'Museum der Obsessionen' (first version 1975), in *Museum der Obsessionen. von / über / zu / mit Harald Szeemann*, Berlin 1981, p. 136; English quoted from *Harald Szeemann. With by through because towards despite. Catalogue of all Exhibitions 1957–2005*, ed. by Tobia Bezzola and Roman Kurzmeyer, Vienna/New York 2007, p. 379.

23 Szeemann 1994 (see note 21), p. 52.

24 The cover of the catalogue features Man Ray's work *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse empaquetage* (1920/1971, a sewing machine wrapped in a woollen blanket, tied up with a string and labelled 'Nicht stören / Do not disturb / Ne pas déranger').

The third and last room, finally, aimed at nothing less than the 'sacralization of seeming indifference'.[25] For each of these rooms Szeemann chose a contemporary sculpture, which in its turn inspired the selection of the other works: *Grond* (1980/81) by Joseph Beuys, *Buffet* (1984/85) by Imi Knoebel and *Studio Piece* (1979) by Bruce Nauman. True to the 'extended exhibition concept', he dispensed with sculptures that 'because they occupy an entire room do not permit the presence of another work'.[26] The show is basically about the gaps in between and the distance in space and content between the works, its aim being to generate an overall picture that would enable visitors to appreciate works from different periods simultaneously.[27]

What interests me about Warburg in relation to Szeemann is his research as practice. Reading Warburg with Szeemann brings to light some surprising points in common with regard to how they organised their work and their methodology. Both left materialised memories in the form of libraries and archives, out of whose holdings they developed their projects. Warburg's Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek and Szeemann's Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit were archives of the lives and works of their respective initiators and hence shaped by their interests and (narcissistic) personalities. In them is preserved everything that passed through their hands, every note and every draft letter. The collections comprised books, photographs, manuscripts, correspondence and other documents, and in Szeemann's case works of art and devotional items. Warburg ordered his books not alphabetically, but according to content, following the 'law of good neighbourliness'.[28] This principle was retained even after 1933, when the rise of Nazism in Germany posed such an existential threat to the institute that it was moved from Hamburg to London. The ordering system in Szeemann's archive was not alphabetical either, except in the case of artists' catalogues. The materials and books were instead grouped according to specific themes and projects. For Warburg, a work of art was more than just an expression of artistic talent and creative energy; it was also a medium in which images might appear unsolicited – like 'phantoms'. Warburg was an image historian. He was interested in processes of transformation and migration to which images are not just subject, but actually keep alive as well. The notion of the 'pathos formula' that is brought to bear in this context was first espoused by Warburg in 1905 for what John M. Krois calls constantly self-renewing 'pictorial forms of representation of heightened emotional expressiveness'.[29] Warburg's 'pathos formula', but also Szeemann's Museum of Obsessions, are complex conceptual constructs through which history can be telescoped to enable the synchronous contemplation and comparison of selected objects from different periods on the same level, be it in a book or in an exhibition.

25 Szeemann 1994 (see note 21), p. 55.

26 Ibid.

27 Søren Grammel defines the objective of Szeemann's 'Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit', an agency specialised in the 'medium of the temporary exhibition', as the 'productive-aesthetic autonomy of the curator', who, 'like a privileged viewer,' mediates between the work and its audience. Grammel asks whether, 'in the authorial exhibition, the curator's individual perspective is articulated more transparently, which would make it more open to criticism than the institutionally produced exhibition with its seemingly uncompromising, scientific objectivity', Søren Grammel, *Ausstellungsautorschaft. Die Konstruktion der auktorialen Position des Kurators bei Harald Szeemann. Eine Mikroanalyse*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, passim.

28 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. Eine intellektuelle Biographie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1981, p. 436.

29 John M. Krois, 'Die Universalität der Pathosformeln. Der Leib als Symbolmedium', in *Bildkörper und Körperschema. Schriften zur Verkörperungstheorie ikonischer Formen*, ed. by Horst Bredekamp and Marion Lauschke, Berlin 2011, p. 76.

Against tired form

Aby Warburg returned to Hamburg from a nine-month tour of the United States in 1896, the year in which Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* premiered in Paris. He would recall this trip and above all his memorable encounter with Pueblo culture many years later, in 1923, when to prove to his doctors at the sanatorium in Kreuzlingen that he was fully recovered and could be discharged immediately he proposed giving a talk and slide show about that unforgettable journey and the anthropological fieldwork he did in the course of it. Warburg was thirty years old at the time of his return from the States and his doctorate already lay four years in the past. He had published very little, most recently an Italian translation of his appraisal of the sources for the costumes and sets of the festivities in Florence for the wedding of Ferdinand I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and Christine of Lorraine, which appeared in 1895 (original German title: 'Die Theaterkostüme für die Intermedien von 1589'). In 1897 he wrote an account of his trip called 'Eine Reise durch das Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Neu-Mexiko und Arizona' ('A Journey through the Territory of the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona'), which he presented as a slide show on several occasions. This was the theme he returned to in Kreuzlingen and it was there that he produced the lecture transcripts that much later would form his memoirs of that momentous encounter with Pueblo culture, published as *Schlangenritual. Ein Reisebericht* (1988) (and in English as *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. Michael P. Steinberg, 2016). Also in 1897 Warburg wrote a discussion of 'Amerikanische Chap-Books' for publication in *Pan* magazine.[30] Chapbooks were cheap booklets produced by young writers and artists that at the time were fashionable in the United States. They did not contain pop literature as such, however, but were intended more as tongue-in-cheek commentary on the literature, art and graphic art of fin-de-siècle Europe and Symbolism. Warburg singled out one such publication, *The Lark*, as being of an especially worthy of note. As he had always been interested in conflicting goals within art generally, and not just in connection with his research into early Renaissance art in Italy, he viewed these chapbooks as symptomatic of the resistance of American early modernism to Europe's 'fin-de-siècle pose of self-satisfied weariness'.[31] That Warburg never analysed representations of women in turn-of-the-century art in his writings is paradoxical only at first glance. What had fascinated him about certain female figures in early Renaissance art was what he called their 'moving accessories', by which he meant their fluttering robes and wild hair. These same attributes in late nineteenth-century art – in the works of Toulouse-Lautrec, for example – seemed to him to be purely ornamental; far from being an expression of enhanced movement, as they had been in the early Renaissance, they exemplified tame, tired form.[32]

The Mnemosyne Atlas

On returning home from Kreuzlingen in 1924, Warburg, together with Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, began working on his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the unfinished

30 Aby Warburg, 'Amerikanische Chap-Books' (1897), in Warburg 1932 (see note 3), pp. 569–77. Heike Gfrereis, 'Kobold im Reich der Gespenster. Aby Warburgs Aufsatz über amerikanische Chap-Books', in *Isaiah Berlin. Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*, I/4, 2007, pp. 97–112.

31 Warburg 1897 (see note 28), p. 577.

32 On the origins of the 'pathos formula', cf. the editors' note in Warburg 2010 (see note 3), pp. 31–8, and Martin Warnke, 'Aby Warburg', in *Schütteln Sie den Vasari ....: Kunsthistorische Profile*, ed. by Matthias Bormuth, Göttingen 2017, pp. 121–53.

book project that he prepared in the medium of the exhibition. Using nearly a thousand images from his collection – photographs of works of art alongside newspaper clippings and illustrations from printed matter – he tried out different constellations in which images might be experienced in dialogue or in conflict with other images. Not only was he visualising the results of his own research into the history of culture, but perhaps even more importantly he was trying to think in pictures. The images were pinned onto cloth-covered panels, which as mobile displays were arranged and rearranged according to theme and then individually photographed for the archive. The *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg* contains an entry for 17th July 1927 in which Warburg describes the procedure as a 'combinatory method'.[33] For Thomas Hensel, the *Atlas* is more a 'generator of performative image acts'.[34] After Warburg died, Gertrud Bing, Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001) and others continued working on an edition of this 'time capsule', but were unable to advance it far enough for there to be any talk of printing. At Warburg's death the *Atlas* was still just a collection of black-and-white photographs of numbered panels supplemented by notes and drafts of the explanatory texts. While there are different versions of it, none of them is definitive. The panels were not published until 1993, when a reconstruction was attempted, once again in the medium of the exhibition.[35] The *Atlas* was at last published as a book in 2000, when Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink edited the original photographs from the Warburg Institute in London as part of the collected writings.[36] Another version of it was exhibited and published by the ZKM / Karlsruhe in 2016. This was the work of the research group Mnemosyne / 8th Salon of Hamburg, which spent several years reconstructing and annotating all sixty-three original panels and published the results of its work in a series of booklets called *Baustelle* (2012–2016). Axel Heil and Roberto Ohrt, who were responsible for the exhibition in Karlsruhe, understand the *Atlas* as an attempt to untangle and understand the conflicted history of the early Renaissance.[37]

The publication of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* changed public perceptions of Warburg. When the reconstructed *Atlas* was exhibited for the first time at Hamburg's Kunsthaus in 1994, the opening address was given by Werner Hofmann, who told those present they were peering 'into the workshop of an exhibition-maker'.[38] The discovery that Warburg had been doing research through the medium of the exhibition, not only compiling sequences of pictures, but also using exhibition formats for his lectures, changed the way his work was received and raised questions about his method. To call him an exhibition-maker, even implicitly, certainly made sense, even though there are no indications of Warburg having concerned himself with exhibiting as a metier. For him, assembling reproductions was really just a way of thinking about pictures, their meaning and their impact. It exposed the bridging function of certain works and their position within the tradition, but at the same time revealed the

33 Aby Warburg, *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg mit Einträgen von Gertrud Bing und Fritz Saxl*, ed. by Karen Michels and Charlotte Schoell-Glass, Berlin 2001, p. 120. On the image series, cf. Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band II.2: Bilderreihen und Ausstellungen*, ed. by Uwe Fleckner and Isabella Woldt, Berlin 2012.

34 Thomas Hensel, *Wie aus der Kunstgeschichte eine Bildwissenschaft wurde. Aby Warburgs Graphien*, Berlin 2011, p. 182.

35 The reconstruction of the Transmediale Gesellschaft daedalus in Vienna is now in the collection of the Albertina.

36 Warburg 2000 (see note 16).

37 Axel Heil, Roberto Ohrt, *Aby Warburg. Mnemosyne Bilderatlas. Rekonstruktion-Kommentar-Aktualisierung*, exh. cat. ZKM Karlsruhe 2016, p. 5, and the author's own conversation with Roberto Ohrt at the Tate Modern in London, 4th December 2016.

38 Werner Hofmann, 'Der Mnemosyne-Atlas. Zu Warburgs Konstellationen', in Galitz/Reimers (eds.) 1995 (see note 6), p. 172.

fault lines that would fracture or transform that tradition. Whenever Warburg touches on the *Atlas* in the letters he wrote in the final years of his life, it is the sheer intensity of the work that shines through. In a letter to Fritz Saxl penned in Rome on 11th February 1929, for example, he writes: 'I'm sitting here in the living room, having previously made space for the whole exhibition, and am now ready to subject the visual material in its totality to a provisional editing of the whole thing. As you have the "Mnemosyne" in Hamburg, you will receive the photographs of the panels shown in the Hertziana, which have turned out very well, at the end of this week, along with marginal comments on further configurations.'[39] In a letter to his wife Mary dated 10th May 1929 from the Excelsior Hotel in Naples, where he was staying with Gertrud Bing, he wrote: 'We have turned the salon into a highly credible laboratory, the view of the Gulf notwithstanding.'[40] Accounting for himself in a letter to his brother Max in 1927, Warburg seems very sure of himself with regard to his *Atlas*, which in 'series of pictures delivers persuasive proof of the advent of the Classical ideal in secular Italian art'.[41] Warburg the scholar worked on the questions that interested him through the medium of the exhibition or held small, semi-private lectures on series of pictures temporarily set up for this purpose. The scientific historian Anke te Heesen has described the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as an '*exposition imaginaire*' that enabled Warburg to visualise a 'train of thought' –even if only to jettison it again.[42] Did Warburg himself apprehend his sets of images as a research tool with which to try out and refine his own conceptual experiments? Anke te Heesen follows the Swiss architectural historian Sigfried Giedion, who in 1928 enumerated 'overview', 'juxtaposition' and 'comparison' as key features of any exhibition, but acknowledges that the concept might also mean the 'exposition of a theory'.[43]

Warburg was most definitely not an exhibition-maker. He was interested in museums, libraries, archives and their work, specifically their documentation, preservation, interpretation and communication of a history of civilisation that was not at all linear. Yet to see in Warburg a crypto-exhibition-maker, as Werner Hofmann did in the address quoted above, was not entirely false, at least not in the latter days of the twentieth century, by which time what was expected of exhibitions had changed. The exhibition-maker had been joined by the figure of the curator, who selects works of art and documents with a view to their capacity for reception by the public at large and hence is interested less in the connoisseur's appreciation of originals than in the visualization of discourses. Curators concern themselves with philosophemes that can be generated with and alongside art. Thus the exhibition-maker as curator does have a certain affinity with Warburg and his iconological praxis after all. We might even concur with Edith Doove that he was a curator *avant la lettre*, especially in view of the methods he put to the test with while working on his *Atlas*.[44]

The young Aby Warburg was perceived as a scholar who publicly championed art-historical research and educational policies. Thus he was among those who in 1909 called on the municipality of Hamburg to appoint an archaeologist to head 'the teaching materials collection' and to take charge of the Kunsthalle's 'collection of plaster casts that as a result of various gifts has

39 WIA, GC, letter from Aby Warburg to Fritz Saxl, 11th February 1929.

40 WIA, FC, letter from Aby to Mary Warburg, 10th May 1929.

41 WIA, FC, report of May 1927 from Aby to Max Warburg.

42 Anke te Heesen, 'Exposition Imaginaire. Über die Stellwand bei Aby Warburg', in *Fotogeschichte,* 112, 2009 (= Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie), pp. 55–64.

43 Ibid.

44 Edith Doove, 'Exploring the Curatorial as Creative Act – Part I Hidden Similarities', in *Transtechnology Research-Reader 2011*, Plymouth 2012, p. 1.

come into the city's possession since 1850'.[45] He himself was offered a post at the Kunsthalle, but chose to decline it, his main interest in those days being his own research and teaching activities. This is also the context in which his small-scale curatorial experiments of those years should be viewed, these having gained significance only in the light of the later series of pictures and the *Atlas*, which are what define the image of Warburg we have today, at least in contemporary art discourse. The first such experiment was an Albrecht Dürer exhibition that he curated at the Hamburg Volksheim, a society dedicated to adult education, in 1905. Christiane Brosius, an expert in Warburg's concept of education, writes how in Hamburg, he 'conceived and realised a major Dürer show for the Volksheim, gave lectures at the university and talks on art to workers. He also taught seminars, which he combined with exercises in front of the originals in the museum, and organised Hamburg's *Akademische Ferienkurse*, which were a kind of precursor of today's adult education centres.'[46] While in his text 'Die Bilderausstellungen des Volksheims' (1907) he queried his own use of reproductions for the teaching of art, these early teaching projects prove that even in his younger years, Warburg was interested in the history of art's development and impact, for the presentation of which reproductions might be just as much of service as originals.

Warburg and Alexander Dorner

The curatorial work of the art historian Alexander Dorner (1893–1957) at the Provinzialmuseum Hanover from 1919 to 1936 and after 1938 at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence (USA) shows just how fundamentally the work of the museum and its educational activities changed during the early modernist period. On being appointed director of the Provinzialmuseum Hanover in 1923, Dorner, whose early writings are now in the Warburg Library's possession, proceeded not just to augment, but also to reorganise the museum's collection.[47] Whereas it had hitherto been customary for museums to exhibit as many of their holdings as possible and chronologically according to period, Dorner selected works of art and cultural artefacts which, if exhibited chronologically, would demonstrate how seeing itself had changed over time. Furthermore, each gallery was painted a different colour to generate a particular atmosphere. Late Medieval Painting, for example, was exhibited against dark red walls and a black linoleum floor. The Renaissance Room featured a selection of sculptures displayed against white or pale grey walls to show its 'position midway between the bright colours of the Late Gothic and the limpid clarity of the Quattrocento'. Dorner called these 'Atmosphere Rooms'. The highlight of the re-installation of the collection in Hanover was the exhibition form chosen for contemporary art. This consisted of two rooms: an 'Abstract Cabinet' developed and realised by Dorner in collaboration with the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky (1890–1941), and a 'Room of the Present' that he worked on with the Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), which was never actually built but would have been dedicated to contemporary art, especially film. The overriding goal was to open up the museum to new sections of society. Instead of being aimed first and foremost at visitors

45 WIA, III 72.2.7. *Zweiter Bericht* ... of the municipal meeting of 26th May 1909, printed report, containing Warburg's submission in *Anlage* 14, p. 45.

46 Christiane Brosius, *Kunst als Denkraum. Zum Bildungsbegriff von Aby Warburg,* Pfaffenweiler 1997, pp. 8–9.

47 Cf. on the life and work, Samuel Cauman, *Das lebende Museum: Erfahrungen eines Kunsthistorikers und Museumsdirektors: Alexander Dorner*, Hanover 1960; Dorner invited Warburg to write a piece for the 1927 Festschrift for Paul Schubring (1869–1935), but Warburg declined for reasons of time; cf. WIA, GC, letter to Dorner of 3rd December 1927.

already familiar with art, it was to speak to art lovers wishing to learn more. 'Both rooms were intended to involve the visitor both physically and spiritually in the growing process of modern reality', wrote Dorner.[48] By working hand in hand with artists on the creation of exhibitions, therefore, Dorner took the first steps towards a form of presentation that seeks to be appreciated as a work of art in its own right.[49]

The walls of the room for abstract art developed with El Lissitzky, for example, 'were sheathed with narrow tin strips set at right angles to the wall plane. Since these strips were painted black on one side, gray on the other, and white on the edge, the wall changed its character with every move of the spectator. The sequence of tones varied in different parts of the room. This construction thus established a supraspatial milieu for the frameless compositions. This visual mobility was further increased by placing a sculpture by Archipenko in front of a mirror. The mirror reflected the reversed side of the metal strips, not the side seen by the spectator. Thus the mirror effect extended the elusive wall construction in such a way that the construction changed its identity in continuing.'[50]

This understanding of showing as a function of the shown and the scrutiny of the same in exhibitions is very much a modernist idea. The 'Picture Room' that the British architect John Soane (1753–1837) designed and built in 1824 to house his collection anticipates this idea in the most fascinating way.[51] The room itself is a small room in the house where Soane lived in London, which since the early nineteenth century has been open to the public as a museum. A private act of parliament initiated by Soane himself in 1833 ensured that on his death, his house along with the adjoining buildings in which his extensive collection of art, architectural models, documents and casts is now housed in rooms that he himself designed and furnished, would be kept open as a museum whose purpose would be to preserve the collection unchanged for inspiration and education. The aforementioned Picture Room, whose instant eye-catcher is the Canaletto painting *Riva degli Schiavoni* (1736) hanging above the fireplace, is a small room with closed, built-in bookcases at the lower level and above them, on three sides, a system of wood panelling that can be folded open like huge doors to expose a second wall underneath, on which still more paintings are hung. In one case, this second wall can likewise be opened to reveal a window looking out onto the inner courtyard, called the Monk's Yard, and the Monk's Parlour on the floor below. Soane described his Picture Room as a solution to the problem of how to accommodate a large collection in a very small space; but what is especially remarkable for our purposes here is that it also allows paintings to be viewed from different angles. It was again Soane who designed the first purpose-built art museum: the Dulwich Picture Gallery built in 1817, when Dulwich was not yet part of London.

Dorner understood art history as not just the representation, but also the visual and discursive communication of the evolution of human seeing, which having overcome the notion of art as work on form would lead to an art of social responsibility. That, at any rate, was how he interpreted the art of his own time. In the 'Abstract Cabinet', writes Julia Burbulla, the wall lost 'its supporting and presenting role', while documents relating to everyday culture

48 Alexander Dorner, *The Way Beyond Art,* New York 1947, p. 17.

49 On El Lissitzky's image concept and his architectural and artistic ideas for making showing and the shown indistinguishable from each other, cf. Simon Baier, 'Metanoia des Bildes. El Lissitzky 1920–28', in Gottfried Boehm, Sebastian Egenhofer and Christian Spies (eds.), *Zeigen. Die Rhetorik des Sichtbaren*, Munich 2010, pp. 315–34.

50 Dorner 1947 (see note 48), p. 114.

51 Cf. *Sir John Soane's Museum. A Complete Description*, London 2014, pp. 21–2.

were exhibited in display tables: 'It was at this point that the actual dividing line between library and collection was relativized. Everyday cultural artefacts became intermingled with artistic originals and replicas. This ordering principle is that of the library as institution, which has always envisaged this kind of co-habitation and knows neither the aura of the original nor the insulation of high culture from everyday culture. Dorner's museum concept came very close to this ideal and supplemented the traditional museum with other presentation, collection and epistemic cultures.'[52]

The inexorable rise of Nazism towards the end of the Weimar Republic put Dorner on the defensive. He left Germany in 1937 and in the United States found scope for implementing much of what he had put up for debate back in the 1920s, including performances of period music inside galleries and the installation of window displays providing the larger cultural context of the exhibits. Dorner called for the relinquishment of all timeless notions in both aesthetics and the history of art and wanted to see a '*new type of art museum*'. Such a museum would show its holdings 'as a product of a relatively short evolutionary phase and part of a finite and strictly limited reality. It would also begin to demonstrate the growth of reality and to show the visual production implicit in that growth.'[53] Any rearrangement of the collection would have to answer the needs of the present, he argued in 1947, since the 'only warrant of the art museum and of the esthetics and art history behind it is the present moment with its particular exigencies.'[54] One consequence of this line of thinking premised on the development of seeing was the recognition that in this respect, reproductions were 'just as effective as their originals'.[55] These ideas seem to have informed the 'Room of the Present' that he developed for Hanover with Moholy-Nagy. Most of the space there would have been taken up with photography and film and with Moholy-Nagy's light machines for the generation of abstract colour light displays. The purpose of the photography, moreover, was to provide a vivid account of modern trends in architecture and product design.

In 1929, the year of Aby Warburg's death, Dorner prepared an exhibition called *Original and Facsimile* for the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Hanover, in which original prints from various periods were shown alongside facsimiles of the same works. The idea was to show visitors how difficult or perhaps even impossible it is to tell the two apart, even for the schooled eye. Dorner was preoccupied primarily with photography and film at the time and, like Walter Benjamin before him, was acutely conscious of what the consequences of the technical reproducibility of the work of art might be. In the 1950s he and his friend Buckminster Fuller (1885–1983) developed a model museum that was to visualise the development of art from the Palaeolithic Age to the twentieth century as well as providing didactic materials with which to educate visitors. The lightweight structure proposed by Fuller was perfectly suited to this new type of museum, which unlike classical art museums would not have anything at all in common with sacred buildings. The 'museum of the future', moreover, was to be devoted exclusively to art education. Following the lead of the shopping malls then being built all over the United States, the two pioneers also planned a 'chain of facsimile museums'.

52 Julia Burbulla, *Kunstgeschichte nach dem Spatial Turn. Eine Wiederentdeckung mit Kant, Panofsky und Dorner*, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 236–8.

53 Dorner 1947 (see note 48), pp. 145–6.

54 Ibid., p. 147.

55 Cauman 1960 (see note 47), p. 120.

Warburg was no longer concerned with new museum concepts in later life. He did not take part in the reform debates of Germany's museum directors, nor was he engaged in dialogue with those artists who were developing serial works of their own. There were no new ideas coming from Warburg in the 1920s, and the full impact of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* would not be felt until much later. If he was thrilled with photography, then only as a medium of technical reproduction and transmission, which is how Walter Benjamin would characterise it just a few years after his death. It was not an art medium in its own right in his view.[56] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh is critical of Warburg's (and Benjamin's) 'media optimism' and speaks of his method as 'archival montage', from which it is impossible to say whether Warburg, like the avant-garde artists of his age, was aware that alone the use of photographic reproductions of art, irrespective of how they are used, is enough to set in motion a process of hermeneutic transformation.[57]

The example of Dorner shows the direction in which the work of a younger generation of art historians and museum directors might develop. Dorner not only recognized the important role that the reproductive media of photography and film would henceforth play in the transmission and teaching of art in museums, and even took account of this in his own exhibitions. Through his proximity to contemporary art and above all his collaboration with Moholy-Nagy, however, he also fostered a perception of photography and film as new artistic media in their own right, as which they were becoming established even then.

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56 On the artistic character of photography, cf. Rolf H. Krauss, *Walter Benjamin und der neue Blick auf die Photographie*, Ostfildern 1998, esp. pp. 34–8.

57 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Atlas. Warburgs Vorbild? Das Ende der Collage/Fotomontage im Nachkriegseuropa', in *Deep Storage. Arsenale der Erinnerung*, ed. by Ingrid Schaffner, exh. cat. Haus der Kunst, Munich et al. Munich 1997, pp. 50–60. The same is true of the 'Musée Imaginaire' by André Malraux (1901–1976), a popular history of world art in the form of an art book, which Walter Grasskamp once described as a modern realisation of the old idea of the 'paper museum' and hence comparable with Warburg's *Atlas*; cf. Walter Grasskamp, *André Malraux und das imaginäre Museum. Die Weltkunst im Salon*, Munich 2014, p. 159.