Why do we need Aby Warburg today?
Or, is image memory a bodily sensation?

Mehmet Berkay Sülek

‘Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original’, 4 September – 1 November 2020, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, curated by Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil

‘The Futureless Memory’, 19 September – 22 November 2020, Kunsthau Hamburg, curated by Katja Schroeder, exhibition concept by Dilek Winchester

‘What does it mean to orient oneself in space?’ was a question asked by the art and cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) at the end of his life,¹ a question that has become more pertinent for two different but intertwined reasons. Firstly, during the global COVID-19 pandemic we have been denied everyday interactions and access to public spaces, including art museums and galleries; secondly, a relatively recent exhibition in 2020 in Berlin’s Haus Der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) displayed the fully ‘recovered’ original version of Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas (1924–1929),² which could be viewed as the end result of his interest in spatiality³ and his vivid usage of spatial metaphors such as Bildfahrzeuge (image vehicles), Gesetz der guten Nachbarschaft (the law of the good neighbour), and Bilderwanderung (the migration of images).⁴

A much-anticipated event for art historians and cultural historians, this was a unique

² See the curators’ statement on the research behind the history of this exhibition of Atlas, and their description of ‘the recovery of the original version’ on the HKW website: www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2020/aby_warburg/bilderatlas_mnemosyne_kuratorisches_statement/text.php
³ Philippe-Alain Michaud claims that from very early on the questions of movement, spectatorship and spatiality become important for Warburg. In this regard, he points to Warburg’s notes under the title of Zuschauer und Bewegung (Spectator and Movement), which Warburg later changed to ‘Movement and Spectator’. This, Michaud claims, denotes a change in Warburg’s thinking about the role of the spectator, from being a passive agent to an active one; see Philippe-Alain Michaud, Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion, New York, Zone Books, 2004, pp 82–83.
⁴ Atlas was also exhibited at ZKM Karlsruhe in 2016. This not only exhibited Atlas but it also included works by contemporary artists Peter Weibel, Olaf Metzel and Paul McCarthy. In 2011, there was another exhibition which paid homage to Warburg, curated by French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, titled ‘Atlas: How to Carry the World as One’s Back?’ at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. The exhibition later travelled to ZKM Karlsruhe in 2011. What distinguished this exhibition, the curators claim, was the fact that the fully recovered version of Mnemosyne was exhibited for the first time. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann has argued that there is enough evidence, such as his usage of spatial metaphors, to suggest that Warburg thought geographically as well as historically; see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Toward a Geography of Art, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.
opportunity for a bodily encounter with *Mnemosyne Atlas* in the flesh. Concurrent with this exhibition, another show also opened in Warburg’s hometown at the Kunsthalle Hamburg; this exhibition, entitled ‘The Futureless Memory’ seemingly employed a Warburgian framework. However, both exhibitions had to be cut short and were transferred to the digital space due to the pandemic. This was both an opportunity and a challenge – an opportunity, as more people were able to view the exhibited works, but a challenge since they then lacked what is essential for these or for any exhibitions: bodily encounters in space. Thus, both raised some questions about exhibition spectatorship: can digital exhibitions compensate for the lack of physical presence, for example? But more importantly, seen together, they evoke another question: why should there even be any talk today about Warburg? Neither question has an easy or definite answer, but they do offer a good base for discussion.

With the publication of his collected writings by Getty Publications in 1999, there has been a resurgence of interest in Warburg and his last and unfinished project, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. It could be argued, however, that this largely stems from *Atlas* rather than from his writing. Despite the wide range of studies on Warburg, there is still an ongoing struggle to understand Warburg and his *Atlas* project. What were his goals, and what did he produce at the end of his life? Was his scholarship original or simply a reflection of his milieu? What was he hoping to find?

---

in his famous visit to the Pueblo Indians, and what did he discover ultimately? Not even Ernst Gombrich, the author of Warburg’s ‘intellectual biography’, could fully make sense of *Atlas*, which he dubbed a whimsical project. For Warburg, on the other hand, *Atlas* was a project that accumulated his life-long interest in *Nachleben der Antike* (the survival of antiquity), in Quattrocento Florence, through what he called the *pathosformel* (pathos formula), which, as Emily J Levine puts it, is ‘the expressive formula in a work of art that was a dialectically derived product of individual expressive impulse and an inherited repertoire of “predefined” classical form’. But it is clear that his interests were larger than the aforementioned issue alone. After all, Warburg himself remarked that ‘every age has the renaissance of antiquity that it deserves’.

Unlike many other art historians at the time, Warburg was engaged in public life and contemporary issues (as is evident in Panel 79 of *Atlas*) and he was a close collaborator of the directors of Kunsthalle Hamburg. Most importantly, perhaps, he was determined to turn Hamburg into an intellectual hub and to establish his hometown as a rival to Berlin. But Warburg was not a fortunate man; his enterprise was left unfinished due to a sudden heart attack in 1929, yet by the time he passed away he was relatively well-known.

After his death, any scholarship on Warburg was disrupted by the onslaught of Fascism that came to permeate not only daily life in much of Europe but also the history of art. Luckily, through the efforts of his colleagues, Warburg’s Library, which he viewed as a laboratory, was transferred to London and later adopted by the University of London. And it is thanks to this transfer that we have access to Warburg and his *Atlas*, which may otherwise have been destroyed by the Fascists and dismissed by the ‘border policies of academia’. Yet, in the twenty-first century, we still do not know how to make sense of Warburg’s project. As Georges Didi-Huberman puts it: ‘Warburg is our dybbuk, and he continues to haunt us’. But why do we need to talk about Warburg today? Why did an institution like HKW, a contemporary art venue, agree to exhibit *Atlas*? These questions bring to mind Theodor Adorno’s famous phrase: ‘Philosophy which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed’. Was the HKW exhibition an opportunity to realise Warburg’s philosophy? And what does this exhibition tell us now?

---

7 Emily J Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, p 54; Warburg used this term for the first time in his Dürer and Italian Antiquity (1905) text
8 Quoted in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, op cit, p 238
9 See Emily J Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky and the Hamburg School*, op cit
10 The case of the Vienna School art historian Hans Sedlmayr, with his sympathy for the Nazis, is a notorious example in this regard; see Christopher S Wood, ed, *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, Zone Books, New York, 2003
12 Warburg was distressed by the specialisation and the division of disciplines in the academy of his day; he accused his colleagues of being border guardians who restricted themselves with the designated toolbox of their disciplines
The HKW exhibition, curated by artists Roberto Ohr and Axel Heill, was a collaboration between HKW in Berlin and the Warburg Institute in London. It was held in conjunction with another exhibition called ‘Between Cosmos and Pathos’ (8 August – 1 November 2020) at Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, which featured the original works of art that Warburg collected images of in his Atlas. This alone is sufficient to demonstrate the significance of Warburg, with the effort that was put into this project and our ongoing fascination with him. There was also a series of talks on Warburg at HKW by various scholars, many of whom are affiliated with the Warburg Institute. However, like the exhibition itself, rather than asking why Warburg matters today, these talks considered the force(s) behind his thinking – a legitimate endeavour, as Warburg does deserve, in my opinion, more recognition. But the question then arises: how do these philological explorations contribute to Warburg’s legacy today? It is perhaps time to move beyond this descriptive attitude to being activist or speculative about Warburg. That being said, however, it would be unjust to expect an answer to such an intricate question. Yet the fact that this question is not raised could be said to be a little strange, especially when the exhibition was at HKW, a contemporary art venue. Moreover, the fate of this exhibition also raises another significant question about what sits at the very centre of all exhibitions: spatiality.

The Spatiality in Mnemosyne

As said, the HKW exhibition was transferred to a digital space as a result of the pandemic occurring shortly after it was opened. Many exhibitions have been relocated to digital spaces over this time, and the online exhibition of art has since become a common practice. But viewing the Warburg exhibition in a digital environment led me to reflect on whether seeing Mnemosyne Atlas in person at HKW would have been a different experience. In my view, it would have made a difference for a simple reason: Atlas was intended to create a bodily encounter for the viewer, and there are number of reasons for arguing that this is the case.

Dorothea McEwan demonstrated that Atlas was not a simple documentation of Warburg’s thinking but, rather, an aid for him to see what he called Wanderstrassen des Geistes (paths taken by the mind). Moreover, he often called the individual panels Wanderkarte (path maps). As McEwan argued, Warburg wanted to see the arteries of Western cultural memory from a bird’s eye view. This act of distancing was fundamental for Warburg, as he described in the very first lines of his unfinished introduction to Atlas. We also know that Warburg constantly reorganised the panels during his lectures, an indication that Atlas was not a static object but more a living

---

15 In the curatorial statement, the curators state that the idea of this exhibition dated back to 2016 when David Freedberg was the Director of the Warburg Institute
organism. This becomes more apparent when one thinks about the role of the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* (KBW) for the construction of *Atlas*.19

Warburg’s library attracted considerable attention during his lifetime, and many scholars – such as Ernst Cassirer and Erwin Panofsky, for example – visited the library. Cassirer famously claimed ‘this library is dangerous. I shall either have to avoid it altogether or imprison myself here for years. The philosophical problems involved are close to my own, but the concrete historical material which Warburg has collected is overwhelming.’ Why was Cassirer bewildered by the library? It is safe to say that one reason was the breadth of the collection, while another was the way in which the library was organised. Warburg arranged the library on the basis of what he coined the ‘law of the good neighbour’, wherein books were not shelved on a chronological or geographical basis but on their proximity in terms of thinking.20 Like *Atlas*, Warburg’s library also took on a new shape with every acquisition and every new spark that came to his mind. If being physically present in the library is important, as Gertrud Bing claimed, and if *Atlas* is innately linked to it, can we say that *Atlas* should also be seen in real space?21 Should we also be physically surrounded by *Atlas* as we would by the shelves of the

---

18 See Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, op cit

19 It is very clear that for Warburg *Mnemosyne Atlas* was intrinsically linked to KBW. To enter the famous reading room of KBW, one had to pass through the ‘Mnemosyne’ sign above the entrance door. *Mnemosyne Atlas* was the result of different forms of activities at KBW. For example, Warburg held a series of what he called Bilderreihen (image series); see Joacim Sprung, ‘A few comments on Aby Warburg’s phrase: “Kritik der reinen Unvernunft”’, *engramma - la tradizione classica nella memoria occidentale*, Vol 125, March 2015, http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2321. In recent years, there have been a number of studies that have investigated how KBW effected Warburg’s thinking and *Atlas*; see Mick Finch, ‘The technical apparatus of the Warburg Haus’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Vol 15, Nos 2–3, 2016, pp 94–106; Tim Ainsworth Anstey, ‘Moving Memory: The Buildings of the Warburg Institute’, *Kunst og Kultur*, Vol 103, March 2020, pp 172–185.

20 For an extensive discussion on Warburg’s library, see ‘The Warburg Institute: A Special Issue on the Library and Its Readers’, *Common Knowledge*, Vol 18, No 1, Winter 2012

21 For the significance of KBW’s architecture and Gertrud Bing’s claim about the effect of being present at the library, see Tim Ainsworth Anstey, ‘Moving Memory: The Buildings of the Warburg Institute’, op cit
library? If Warburg’s library is a laboratory, or a process of thinking, could we also claim that this is the case for *Mnemosyne*? These questions can be answered in different ways. If we want to understand what the content of *Mnemosyne* signifies, then the answer would be ‘no’. But if we want to understand Warburg’s thinking and his methodology, then the answer would be ‘yes’. This becomes a more plausible case when one considers the often-overlooked role of *Einfühlung* (feeling into/empathy) in Warburg’s approach to art history.

The theory of *Einfühlung* emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in Germany and it was extremely influential, particularly among art historians such as August Schmarsow, Heinrich Wölflin and Willem Worringen. It is sufficient here to state that *Einfühlung* denotes the bodily encounter between the spectator and the artwork in space. It was a concept that influenced Warburg throughout his life, beginning with his doctoral thesis on Sandro Botticelli and concluding with his *Mnemosyne*. Warburg was particularly influenced by Robert Vischer’s *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics* (1873), in which Vischer gives the clearest formulation of *Einfühlung*. Moreover, Warburg was a student of August Schmarsow at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, where he must have been encouraged to think intensely about *Einfühlung*. Warburg’s interaction with Schmarsow is particularly important, as Schmarsow was also the first art historian who understood architecture as space influenced by *Einfühlung*. Most recently, Georges Didi-Huberman also demonstrated the significance of *Einfühlung* for Warburg by exploring a peculiar object that Warburg placed in *Mnemosyne*: the Liver of Piacenza. Didi-Huberman argues that this object was the embodiment of Warburg’s interest in adopting the notion of *Einfühlung* into the question of ‘knowledge through incorporation’. Thus, it could be argued that the notion of *Einfühlung* is vital for the reading of *Mnemosyne*, although the precise effect of this term is as ambiguous as many other aspects in Warburg’s thinking. Nevertheless, the question seems to be crucial for Warburg, throughout his life and in *Mnemosyne*, and it also leads me to the second exhibition I am considering here: ‘The Futureless Memory’ at Kunsthaus Hamburg (19 September – 22 November 2020).

**Routes of Migration**

The timing of the ‘The Futureless Memory’ exhibition is quite telling, as if the organisers of these two exhibitions wished to conceive of both exhibitions as being together. I would suggest that ‘The Futureless Memory’ adopts a Warburgian standpoint in Warburg’s hometown of Hamburg, and perhaps without realising it poses a question about why we should talk about Warburg today. However, there were no specific references to Warburg at this exhibition.

---

24 See August Schmarsow, ‘The Essence of Architectural Creation’ [1893], in ibid, pp 281–298
Katja Schroeder, the curator, and Dilek Winchester, who conceived the exhibition concept, state that the title of the exhibition was derived from the writings of a Turkish-Cypriot psychologist, Vamık D Volkan, who wrote extensively on the psychology and traumas of dislocated people. Many of the artists in the exhibition explore the migration and exile of not just people but also of ideas. In a similar vein to Warburg’s thinking, it attempts to demonstrate pathways of memory and how memories survive the migration from one location to another.

Dilek Winchester’s mixed media work *Stick, Stone, and Bones* (2020) examines Kurt Schwitters’s years of exile (1940–1941) on the Isle of Man in the UK during the time of the Nazi period in Germany. It uses archival material on Schwitters, combining this with videos and sculptural interventions, which taken as a whole also echoes the work of Hanne Darboven. This is where the HKW and ‘The Futureless Memory’ exhibitions overlap. Many scholars have pointed out the similarities between the collage-like qualities of both Warburg’s *Atlas* and Kurt Schwitters’s collage works. Warburg and Schwitters also seem to share a similar fate: both their work had to migrate to another country, the UK, in order to survive.

Dilek Winchester’s work was only one of the works in ‘The Futureless Memory’ that investigate the migration of artists from Germany to the UK during the Nazi era. Michaela Melián’s installation *Movement* (2020) sheds light on the long-forgotten Hamburg violinist Susanne Lachman, while Judith Raum’s installation looked at the tragic life of Otti Berger, who was regarded as one of the most talented textile designers at the Bauhaus along with Anni Albers. We learn that Berger was killed at Auschwitz after she returned to Germany in the hope of saving her family members. Judith Raum works with large pieces of *tulle*27 – her preferred material for constructing Berger’s story and legacy. These large pieces of *tulle* also veil another story, the story of Khaled Barakeh, a Syrian artist and immigrant. In the exhibition, we saw Barakeh’s early paintings, which clearly demonstrate the influence of Van Gogh on the young artist while he was still in Syria, an influence so clear that it could be assumed that these are actually Van Gogh’s paintings, if one overlooks things like the fabrics with their Middle Eastern designs and the musical instruments such as the *oud*.28

Yet the exhibition did not focus solely on the transmission or migration of art or artists but also on ideas and scholars. If migration from Germany to the UK was the most established route in the exhibition, another important pathway was from Germany to Istanbul. After the Nazis came to power, a significant number of scientists immigrated to the young Republic of Turkey. During that time, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country aimed to modernise all its educational institutions, and the universities in particular. Turkey became a

---

26 There are a number of scholars who have investigated the collage and montage qualities of *Atlas*; see Kurt W Forster, ‘Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents’, David Britt, trans., October, Vol 77, Summer 1996, pp 5–24; Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, op cit; and Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, op cit
27 *Tulle* is a fine, lightweight but stiff netting fabric, usually synthetic but sometimes also in silk
28 The *oud* is a widely used musical instrument in the Middle East
safe refuge for these scholars, and many of them took posts at the young Turkish universities. For example, the exhibition featured some of the letters of one such immigrant, the literary scholar Erich Auerbach, who while he was in Istanbul wrote letters to his friend Walter Benjamin. Eda Aslan and Dilşad Aladağ’s sound installation Garden of (not) Forgetting (2017) investigates the forgotten story of the Istanbul Botanical Garden, founded by the Jewish émigré scientists Alfred Heilbron and Leo Brauner. The artists reveal how the Istanbul Botanical Garden and its memory are endangered due to the acquisition of the land by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs in 2015. They ask if the memory and legacy of the garden can flourish when its roots are displaced.


The idea of forced exile or the migration of memories sat at the very centre of the exhibition, and Nadia Christidi’s Cultivating Exile (2015), placed at the entrance of the exhibition, was the clearest example of this theme. Cultivating Exile consists of five raised beds in which various plants are planted. In conjunction with these beds, one was also able to listen to the stories of these specific plants and what kind of meanings are given to them, one location after another. Like Aslan and Aladağ’s works, Christidi’s work also asks if memories can flourish in foreign terrains.

---


30 Eric Auerbach completed his milestone book, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, first published in 1946, in Istanbul
– and if so, how they survive and what forms they might take while still engaged in the search for belonging. Thus, it becomes clear that the movement of migration, and how objects, artworks, ideas and people change, became the central questions of the exhibition. It is this that made ‘The Futureless Memory’ Warburgian: it sought to understand how ideas survive when they migrate, and what kind of pictorial orientations they take on the way. The question of the movement itself becomes a point of enquiry in a similar way to Warburg and ‘Bilderatlas’. Unfortunately, the exhibition, like ‘Bilderatlas’, suffered from the fact that it had to be viewed in a digital space. It aimed to explore the effect of migration on memory, but the exhibition itself was not able to create either a sense of migration or of space. This lack of spatiality was crucial, considering the central question of memory in the exhibition.

Space or spatiality has always been a significant concept in discussions about memory, since the Art of Memory tradition of Ancient Greece, a discussion continued by Giulio Camillo during the Renaissance, Maurice Halbwachs at the end of the twentieth century, and Pierre Nora with his formulation of ‘lieux de memoire’. But when viewing ‘The Futureless Memory’ online, we are robbed of the sensation of space; the routes of migration and exile that the curator and artists intended us to feel are reduced to mere geometric lines of scrolling. To paraphrase Eric Dardel,

---

31 Papapetros argues that Warburg’s interest in fluttering garments was not original at all but a common point of inquiry among many art historians, including Warburg’s professor, August Schmarsow. What separate is Warburg from his peers, Papapetros claims, is the fact that movement itself became a methodology for Warburg; see Spyros Papapetros, On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012.

geometric space is uniform and neutral, whereas geographic space has a name, a horizon, a feeling. Here, too, in this format of ‘The Futureless Memory’, the geography, from Berlin to Istanbul, Hamburg to London, becomes abstract points on a map; the empathy is replaced with abstraction.

Conclusion

‘Bilderatlas’ at HKW was one of the most important events of recent times, a fulfilment of our captivation with Warburg and his Atlas, and the exhibition and the accompanying talks were significant milestones for recognition of him and his endeavour. They helped to disseminate ‘Bilderatlas’ and the ideas embedded in it, and there will probably be a second peak of Warburgmania in the following years. But it is also likely that we will delve into the loop of philological questions, rather than address the more fundamental question: why do we need Warburg today? The fact that this question was not asked, in my view, the only drawback of the HKW exhibition, but it is certainly a significant one. ‘The Futureless Memory’ exhibition becomes important, and probably for a reason that the curators of the exhibition never considered: in the city where Warburg was born and spent most of his life, the exhibition established itself as a Warburgian experiment, as if the ghost of Warburg haunted both ‘The Futureless Memory’ and the Kunsthau Hamburg. Both exhibitions, ‘Bilderatlas’ in Berlin and ‘The Futureless Memory’ in Hamburg, suffered from being transferred to the digital space. The two exhibitions invited us on a journey between artworks and various materials in palimpsestic spaces, and encouraged us to embody the routes of migration – yet we were unable to actually do so. In this regard, both raised the question about the competence of digital exhibition viewing. They reminded us that exhibitions are primarily spatial forms and led to the question: how can a sensation of space be created in a digital environment? This is a something for which we will have to seek answers, as the pandemic, or the fear of it, will, it seems, continue to keep us captive in the near future.

Mehmet Berkay Sülek is a PhD Candidate in art history at the University of Amsterdam. His PhD project investigates how Aby Warburg’s methodology can help us to overcome the historiographic challenges caused by large-scale exhibitions and contemporary art. He is also the co-founder of PNSA (Postgraduate Network for the Study of Art Historiography).