Space for thinking between the images
On the genesis of the 'photographic collection' as an artistic genre

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Werner Hofmann sees Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* atlas as a view 'into the workshop of an exhibition-maker'.[1] Although Warburg surely had no intention of 'exhibiting his pictorial atlas in an art museum', he pioneered a tendency that is becoming ever more prevalent, also in the field of exhibitions: 'the reproduction is more and more asserting its place as a means of communication alongside the original'.[2]

The impulse provided by Warburg's pioneering act remains influential today. His atlas, interpreted as art in spite of his intentions, becomes similar to what artists do when they behave like collectors in relation to their own or to appropriated images. However, the *Mnemosyne* atlas has already been much more broadly interpreted in the course of its posthumous history. Regardless of whether or not they knew Warburg's work, the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman sees a relationship between it and the work of numerous artists since the 1960s: 'I am not only thinking of the paradigm of the cartographic atlas that we see in Robert Smithson, Alighiero e Boetti, and so many other artists; and not only in the artistic interpretations of Warburg in the form of direct references, even performances or "digitised" prolonging. I am thinking above all about the fact that some of the artists who were the most radical in their formal choices – Josef Albers or Ad Reinhardt in the field of abstract painting, or Sol LeWitt in that of minimalist sculpture – have felt, at a certain point, the structural need to acquire photographic atlases. I am thinking also of two great artists who took the inexhaustible element of the atlas at face value: Marcel Broodthaers, with the methodical humour of the gay science, and Gerhard Richter, with the impressive scope of his *Atlas*, which he has created over a long period. I am thinking, finally, of the considerable production of photographic books among contemporary artists, or their use of impersonal archives, as we see in the magnificent

collection entitled *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, in the *Album* of Hans-Peter Feldmann, in the books and films of Ulrike Ottinger, or in the anonymous photographs collected in *Floh* by Tacita Dean. Not to mention, within this inexhaustible profusion, the photographic "table" apparatuses reinvented by Christian Boltanski or Robert Filliou, Annette Messager or Sophie Calle, Robert Rauschenberg or John Baldessari, Dennis Oppenheim or Victor Burgin, Hanne Darboven or Lothar Baumgarten, Fischli & Weiss, Susan Hiller or Joëlle Tuerlinckx.'[3]

The exhibition Atlas, curated by Didi-Huberman, also opens up a broad field of enquiry. *How to Carry the World on One's Back?* could be seen in Karlsruhe, Hamburg and Madrid in 2010/11. The *Mnemosyne* atlas formed Didi-Huberman's point of departure here, just as it did for his study *L'image survivante*. The atlas exhibition spread out a panorama of – not just aesthetic – artefacts and revealed how the pictorial atlas' systematic principle of ordering can help serve both rigorous scholarship and also lead us into surreal universes. Although pictorial atlases had become standard means of presentation for more and more academic fields since the 18th century – including geography, history, ethnology, mathematics, astrology, botany, and medicine, for example – none of the predecessors or descendants of the *Mnemosyne* atlas have stimulated as much interest among artists and cultural historians as its fragmentary tableaux of photographs.

In this sense, it seems appropriate to focus this context much more narrowly for once, as has been done in the exhibition *Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images?* Here, the *Mnemosyne* atlas appears in the role of precursor to an art movement or genre that has increasingly established itself since the 1960s and essentially consists in developing forms of exhibiting collected material. It is true that a great diversity of objects was also gathered in an accumulative form into tableaux or installations featuring an abundance of material, for example, by France's Nouveaux Réalistes as early as 1960; nonetheless, the connection to Warburg's atlas can be most manifestly established in the case of a tendency that articulated itself in highly diverse forms, but could be broadly labelled 'photographic collection'. Found photos clipped from newspapers, magazines, or books; photos taken by the artists themselves; or – since the advent of the Internet – photographs or reproductions of photographs taken from the Internet are presented in strictly serial or in extremely unconventional combinations and arrangements.

The spectrum encompasses everything from Bernd and Hilla Becher's systematic photographic archiving of dilapidated industrial architecture, the *Section Publicité* on the motif of the eagle in Marcel Broodthaers's fictive museum of modern art, Gerhard Richter's extensive

Atlas collection of photos, and Christian Boltanski's fictional photographic reconstruction of his own childhood all the way to Hans-Peter Feldmann's turning to the everyday photographic production of amateurs.

There can scarcely be anything in the world which exists in greater superfluity than photographs, and this clearly raises the question of why artists, of all people, should choose to further contribute to this excess. In terms of perceptual ecology, so to speak, substantial objections ought to be made. However, those images that are to be categorized as art make up only a tiny fraction of photographs as a whole – as was determined by William M. Ivins Jr. for the field of printmaking in his 1953 book, *Prints and Visual Communication*. Their significance 'is undoubtedly greater for science, technology, and general information than it is for art'.[4] A similar statement could be made in regard to photography.

This perspective is self-evident outside of the art system; however, it can also stimulate a productive reaction within the field of art. The artists just mentioned and the artists of the exhibition *Dear Aby Warburg*, most of whom were born in the 1970s, are interested not in the aesthetically perfect, fine-art photo, but in photographs and ways of making photographs that lie outside the realm cultivated by typical 'fine-art photography'. Like Ivins, they concentrate their attention on the 99% of images that are not the product of an aesthetic intention. In contrast, many fine-art photographers have made an effort – which received renewed inspiration through the potential for technical perfection in large formats, a development that has progressed with increasing intensity since the 1970s – to imitate or surpass the aesthetic effect of paintings. When digital editing removes even the most minor imprecision deriving from the picture-taking technology, something else vanishes more and more: the intellectual stimulus and the almost criminological gratification offered by the gaze upon the accidental and the unintended, which the surrealists, in particular, discovered in photography. And without something like a criminological desire, Warburg's pictorial atlas would hardly have come into being.

In 1997, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh raised the question of 'Warburg's Paragon' while investigating the 'genre' of the photographic collection in contemporary art in terms of a cohesive area for research. In many cases, Buchloh observed an 'almost mechanical arrangement, like that found in the system of the archive'.[5] Found photographs and printed reproductions had already been extensively used in the collages and montages of the 1920s and 1930s. There was the fundamental difference, however, that in the case of 'photographic collections', the found images usually appear in their entirety and not in the form of passages or motifs cut out of them. Additionally, in contrast to the confrontational 'shock aesthetic' of the montage, images are presented in more or less serial sequences and in terms of a network-like, overflowing accumulation of branches. According to Buchloh, thematic aspects operating in 'photographic collections', such as the 'recording of complex historical processes, the amassing of facts, the arrangement of events in chronological order and temporal continuity' also contradict 'the avant-garde objectives of immediacy, shock, and fragmentation'.[6]

Buchloh concentrates on European artists in his research. Thus, he does not deal with the Appropriation Art of the US: around 1980, these artists pushed ahead the development of the appropriation of 'foreign' visual material into a programmatic 'postmodern' subversion of traditional models of originality and authorship.

Richard Prince, for example, manipulated advertising images such as the Marlboro Man or sexist reproductions from motorcycle magazines in a series of steps that avoided every traditional trace of the artist's hand: 'The images were removed from their original sources with either scissors or a camera, which Prince referred to as "electronic scissors". He understood the copying process in terms of an 8-track photography, analogous to the mixing of music, and he differentiated between the following possibilities of variation: "1. The original copy, 2. The rephotographed copy, 3. The angled copy, 4. The cropped copy, 5. The focused copy, 6. The out-of-focus-copy, 7. The black-and-white copy, 8. The color copy." Beginning with the original source image, which is itself already a copy, Prince is interested in the acceptance of the copying technique as an artistic practice that is limited to the manipulation of cropping, colour, and depth of field.'[7]

Much like Louise Lawler or Sherrie Levine, who are also to be associated with Appropriation Art, Prince stands the traditional relationship between original, copy, and forgery on its head. Stefan Römer sees this as the result of a biography already fundamentally shaped by the media: 'Prince speaks as a representative of the first generation that grew up with medium of television. He is of the opinion that people had developed a closer personal relationship with de-subjectivized depictions found in the media than with the original celebrities in an everyday environment, who were unapproachable for them. For him, the media images are the real originals.'[8]

Although Prince was surely unaware of the *Mnemosyne* atlas, Römer sees direct parallels between his tableaux and Warburg's technique: 'Prince utilizes a sort of "practical iconology", and always situates an image or a fragment of an image in a context that investigates its ties

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to other images and texts. This directly recalls the "pictorial atlas" of Aby Warburg. The structural affinity to Warburg expresses itself in the fact that both – unlike traditional connoisseurs of art – worked without differentiating between reproductions of pop culture and of art.[9]

In his biography of Warburg, Ernst H. Gombrich writes that the former 'had never been interested in the orthodox art historical approach which concentrated on the slow evolution of stylistic means of representation. He had no use for connoisseurship but aimed at a scientific psychology of the artistic process'.[10] In a sense, Warburg wrested the visual material of art history from the standard categories of academic art history in order to situate it within new frameworks and in combination with images from other contexts. With the help of specific representational motifs, gestures, and details – such as the dynamic application of line in the depiction of clothing – he sought to pursue a sort of social memory which ran through all epochs and cultures. Warburg also used the term *Engramm*, which the evolutionary biologist Richard Semon had used to refer to a permanently engraved psychic trace within the memory. Warburg used terms drawn from the fields of electricity and transportation to refer to those energies that – across historical periods and across cultures – are stored and transformed in the memory of humanity, so to speak, and are given expression through the *Pathosformeln* [pathos formulae], surely the best-known concept in Warburg's thought.

If a similar motif emerges at very different locations, this leads to questions about the reasons for such unexpected affinities. On the other hand, motifs change. In the course of time, the same gesture can change in significance, even to the point of a complete 'inversion': 'The closer one looks, the more dense and tangled the connections appear. The images seem to simultaneously strive in multiple directions and to burst apart like fireworks.'[11]

Warburg repeatedly recombined the images, as is described by Gombrich: 'The method of pinning photographs to a canvas presented an easy way of marshalling the material and reshuffling it in ever new combinations, just as Warburg had been used to re-arranging his index cards and his books whenever another theme became dominant in his mind.'[12] Accordingly, Didi-Huberman sees the *Mnemosyne* atlas less as an already existent interpretation of the transmission of images than as a visual matrix for the multiplication of possible interpretations.'[13]

This description could also be used to describe the image archive of the German artist Peter Piller, who has expanded the removal of magazine images from their original context into an extensive system. Like Prince, employment that involved working with images provided

decisive impulses for Piller's handling of photos in his art.[14] Prince had been working in the picture editing department of Time-Life since 1976.[15] In 1997, while still a student at the HFBK (university of fine arts) in Hamburg, Piller began a job at a media agency, where he spent years occupied with the evaluation, checking, and archiving of regional newspapers. It was not long before – parallel to the tasks assigned to him – he began to pay attention to the photos published in the newspapers which landed on his desk every day.

His *Suchende Polizisten* [police officers searching] are underway with their tracking dogs, searching fields or inspecting forest paths: they can almost be seen as alter egos of the artist combing through his stock of images. His search expeditions also repeatedly produce a remainder of 'ungeklärte Fälle' [unsolved cases]. This is the term he uses for collected newspaper photos that cannot be placed into any other category or, to put it another way, have not yet found any other images with which they could join to form a category.

Nonetheless, the tableaux that Piller assembles from his archive can scarcely be referred to as 'atlases'. At this point, it seems appropriate to distinguish the concept of the (pictorial) atlas not only from the collage and the montage but also from the concept of the archive, which experienced a boom in the art sector, starting in the late 1990s.[16] According to Didi-Huberman, atlas and archive are to be distinguished as follows: 'Yet some essential differences separate the atlas of images from the economy of the archive. Let us recall that *Mnemosyne* is made up of around a thousand images, which is very little if we think of the archives – the picture library – that Warburg and Saxl had built up over decades in the context of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg. The atlas chooses while the archive refuses to choose for a long time.[17] While Warburg planned to use a selection of around 2,000 photos for the *Mnemosyne* atlas, the Warburg-Saxl-Archive comprised more than ten times as many photos in 1929, around 25,000 to be more precise.[18] Didi-Huberman goes on: 'The atlas offers us panoramic tables where the archive forces us first of all to get lost among the boxes. The atlas shows us the trajectories of survival in the interval of images, whereas the archive has not yet made such intervals in the thickness of its volumes, in piles or in bundles. There would of course be no atlas possible without the archive that precedes it; the atlas offers in this sense the "becoming- sight" and the "becoming-knowledge" of the archive.'[19]

In Prince's work, the archive behind the manifest selection of images is not thematized; instead, as described above, attention is directed primarily to the copying technique that provides the basis for the mani-

pulation of the selected images. In Piller's work, by contrast, the archive is always present in every selection displayed. There are three levels, in a sense: the archive, book publications drawing upon it, and the presentation of larger versions of the photographs in exhibitions. Accordingly, there is no difference between 'work' and 'exhibition': every visible presentation is a self-sufficient realization entirely conceived by the artist. The exhibitions are designed to be seen in person, to be explored on foot, so to speak. 'documentation' makes no sense because the book publications from the archive already exist for the purposes of any mere viewing at home. This is why Piller does not publish any exhibition catalogues, which would furthermore face the same difficulty as all publications which reproduce tableaux from the *Mnemosyne* atlas – including the present catalogue.

The reproductions of works in this book, representing the 22 artists of the exhibition, display either individual photos or complete installation views.

If the entire wall-filling or three-dimensional displays of photographic reproductions are, for their part, photographically reproduced, then the individual photos become so small that they can scarcely be recognized – even in large-format, high-resolution images. The two-dimensional rendering of the often complex spatial relationships also creates difficulties. To mention two examples: this is true of Alexandra Leykauf's images, which unfold into the space and almost suggest architectural models, and it is also true of the apparently fragile sculptural displays by Koenraad Dedobbeleer. It is also true in the case of Katalin Deér, who mounts her photos on an imitation-plaster polished plaster background, which subsequently functions only in terms of an optical stimulus, while its nuanced haptic effect is lost.

In the era of Google Images, this seemingly archaic, manual interaction with individual photos reinvests the image with that which it lacks in the Internet: its physical presence. We are called upon not only to see images and their interrelationships, but to feel them, to search them out with our hands, so to speak.

The best metaphor for this is offered by the filmstrip that Eske Schlüters lets slide through her fingers in *One of these things is not like the others:* not to see each individual image, but to feel it on our skin. This might provide an answer to the question *Was geschah wirklich zwischen den Bildern?* [what really happened between the images?], which provided the title of Werner Nekes' 1986 film on the prehistory of the cinema. Curiosity about what happens between the images when they are placed in new contexts is surely a significant force motivating all of the artists in the exhibition. The question 'What is to do done with images?' is also a question about the relationship between the archive and the presentation – the atlas, the tableau, the display. Does the archive in question represent a limited body of material, for example, the glass negatives exposed in a photo studio during the 1930s and 1940s and purchased by Cécile Hummel from a street vendor in southern Italy, or the images that Paula Roush gathered at Portuguese flea markets and garage sales to archive in her *Found Photo Foundation*? It is usually impossible to trace the provenance of these photographs, which Roush refers to as 'ophans'. They have become homeless, but nonetheless tell something like a private, subterranean history of the time spent under a dictatorship. Or do the images derive from a variety of sources, without being founded upon a coherent archive, as is the case in Özlem Altin's investigation of formal correspondences between depictions of the body in motion. Are the images stolen away, so to speak, out of their original context or are their sources carefully documented, as in the case of Katrin Mayer, who also repeatedly juxtaposes them with passages of text that interest her – resulting in the creation of a new context for both image and text?

Regardless of all of the differences in terms of the technique and the potential sources of the images, the art of the 'photographic collection' can be summarily described as a sort of game of Memory. When playing the normal version of Memory, it is the still-hidden cards whose pictures cannot be seen. But let us assume that Memory were to consist of thousands of cards, most of which are not even on the table and some of which may even have been lost.[20] Ultimately, Warburg was already playing this game, as Didi-Huberman at least optically establishes in the case of the *Mnemosyne* atlas: 'The images of an ensemble photographed on a single plane are suggestive of a card game spread out on a table.'[21] The only difference is that Warburg did not have access to as many potential picture cards as the millions that can now be called up at any time in the Internet. Nonetheless, the media theorist Claus Pias thinks that much could still be learned from Warburg for the development of digital search engines. The issue to be resolved is 'less a purely visual ordering of images than precisely that problem of how to simultaneously display more than one ordering of images related to a limited amount of data. The presence of sets of data in which there is no 'evident', 'natural', or 'best' form of display, but only many possible forms is, however, the defining characteristic of digital media and simultaneously their central problem.'[22] Still, current practice remains well behind the level achieved by Warburg. Since 2011, it has in fact been possible to 'enter' images instead of a word or sequences of words into a Google search, which is then conducted according to optical similarities. However, thematically relevant results are rarely

achieved. 'Conducting a search for "optically similar" images, apparently without considering what similarity and comparison actually mean' cannot offer a substitute for what an artist does with images: tracking down inter-connections that no other person and particularly no algorithm could ever establish.[23] The artists of the exhibition *Dear Aby Warburg* are collectors of images; their artistic individuality consists less in a style or gesture than in the specific manner in which they (sometimes going much further than pioneers such as Prince and Piller) also physically open up new spaces for thinking between the images – something begun by Warburg when he started to pin photos to canvasses.

<div style="writing-mode: vertical">Ludwig Seyfarth</div>

1   Werner Hofmann: "Mnemo-syne-Atlas: Zu Warburgs Konstellationen" (speech held at the opening of the Mnemo-syne exhibition at the Kunsthaus Hamburg on 2 June 1994), in: Robert Galitz and Brita Reimers (ed.): *Aby Warburg: „Ekstatische Nymphe … trauernder Flußgott": Porträt eines Gelehrten*, Hamburg 1995, pp. 172–83 (p. 172).

2   Ibid., p. 173 f.

3   Georges Didi-Huberman: *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, exh. cat. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; ZKM | Museum für Neue Kunst, Karlsruhe; Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg 2010, p. 185.

4   William M. Ivins: *Prints and Visual Communication*, Cambridge 1953, p. 2.

5   Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: "Warburg's Paragon? The End of Collage and Photomontage in Postwar Europe", in: I.Schaffner and M.Winzen (ed.): *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, (exh. cat. Haus der Kunst, Munich; Sonderausstellungshalle am Kulturforum, Berlin; Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle), Munich and New York 1997, pp. 50–60 (p. 59).

6   Ibid., p. 50.

7   Stefan Römer: *Künstlerische Strategien des Fake: Kritik von Fälschung und Original*, Cologne 2001, p. 123.

8   Ibid., p. 135.

9   Ibid., p. 146.

10   Ernst H. Gombrich: *Aby Warburg: An intellectual biography*, London 1970, p. 308.

11   Georges Didi-Huberman: *Das Nachleben der Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit nach Aby Warburg.* Berlin 2010, p. 512.

12   Gombrich, p. 284.

13   Didi-Huberman, *Nachleben der Bilder*, p. 512.

14   Ulrike Kuschel's work at Ullstein Bild played a similar role (see the contribution in this volume, pp. 189.

15   See Römer, p. 120.

16   See, e.g., Schaffner and Winzen: *Deep Storage*; *Archiv X: Ermittlungen der Gegenwartskunst*, exh. cat. O.K Centrum für Gegenwartskunst Oberösterreich, Linz 1998); Andreas Baur and Ludwig Seyfarth (ed.): *Recherche – entdeckt! Bildarchive der Unsichtbarkeiten*, exh. cat. 6. Internationale Foto-Triennale Esslingen, 2004, Frankfurt a. M. 2004.

17   Didi-Huberman: *Atlas*, p. 185.

18   See Didi-Huberman: *Nachleben der Bilder*, p. 499, note 524.

19   Didi-Huberman: *Atlas*, p. 187.

20   Cf. Ludwig Seyfarth: *Memory mit tausend Karten: Von der Dokumentation der Welt zur Dokumentation der Bilder*, in: Silke Grossmann and Wilhelm Körner (ed.): *scheinbar sichtbar: Fotografie als Dokument und Projektion*, Hamburg 2002.

21   Didi-Huberman: *Nachleben der Bilder*, p. 500.

22   Klaus Pias: "Ordnen, was nicht zu sehen ist", in: Wolfgang Ernst, Stefan Heidenreich and Ute Holl (ed.): *Suchbilder: Visuelle Kultur zwischen Algorithmen und Archiven*, Berlin 2003, pp. 99–108 and 168 f. (p. 105).

13   Felix Thürlemann: "Christus eingegeben und Hitler gefunden beim Ikonogoogeln", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 September 2011 <http://www.faz.net/frankfurter-allgemeine-zeitung/natur-und-wissenschaft/christus-eingegeben-und-hitler-gefunden-beim-ikono-googlen-11167796.html> (accessed 30 October 2012). My thanks to Thomas Hensel for drawing my attention to this article.