

An Unexpected Influencer. Aby Warburg as a Muse for Contemporary Visual Culture

**On-and-offline Book Display
and Open Survey**

curated by Chiara Capodici
and Benedetta Cestelli Guidi
Through the book(s) on the web #4



An Unexpected Influencer.

We are witnessing a growing interest in Aby Warburg's use of images and in the ways he displayed them in original visual narratives.

During his life long research he choose visual narratives as the main tool of investigation and explanation of Mediterranean cultures.

We believe that inclusion of non academic perspectives within Warburg's legacy will enhance a wider debate around his (anti) methodology.

We are interested in projects involving images, and especially photography, books, displays, graphics, photographic archives and collections, both on and offline.

Within the academic discourse Warburg's innovations has been largely discussed to the extent that nowadays he is considered the forerunner of cultural and visual studies.

He is believed to be an original author whose creativity and innovation opened the way towards visuality and visual narratives and his researches' methods overturned methodological boundaries within the history of art and culture, and appropriated alternative systems of understanding culture.

Warburg's generation witnessed a stunning growing production and availability of photography to which philosophers and artists reacted in critical and creative ways.

Photography opened up new cultural and socio-political scenarios - Benjamin and Kracauer - and boasted visual display and creativity - Ėjzenštejn, El Lissitzkj, Moholy Nagy.

The relentless new visual culture offered a wide range of possibilities to those willing to turn from erudition to creativity; Warburg created a visual Atlas by mounting hundreds of photographs on black boards.

His **Atlas** of images of memory Bilder Atlas Mnemosyne -is a mind blowing device: it is open and fluid to interpretation, has no written texts or explanation attached to the mounted photographs. Warburg premises in using photographs speak our own visual language and resembles contemporary use of the web with endless acts of choosing, archiving, mounting visual narratives.

The gigantic collection of books of his **library** and its an untraditional system, known as '*legge del buon vicinato*', thanks to which books were ordered have always been a great inspiration for our way to deal with printed matter and its contents.

On and offline book display and open survey

Leporello's **Through the book(s) on the web #4** is focused on an informal selection of books inspired by or concerned with Warburg's innovative premises, from groups of publications more related to the theoretical side of the discourse, to authors such as Georges Didi-Huberman on one side and Gerhard Richter and Hans Peter Feldman on the other; to clusters of books chosen both from Leporello's bookshelves and from our private libraries.

The book selection is partly on display both in Leporello and on its web-site, going along with a series of interviews and projects published on Leporello's blog and on [*#anunexpectedinfluencer*](#) instagram account.

A survey will serve as a guide for a selection of works that will be also published on Leporello's platforms devoted to the project and to widen the book display thanks to your indications.

This project is a result of our involvement with recent photographic projects which resonate with Warburg's use of photography; Leporello's call therefore aims to open up a discussion within contemporary artist practices inspired by Warburg's image based narratives.

The call is addressed to all those who use visual language and are interested in all inclusive and fluid methods of visual mounting processes following a-historical and anti hierarchy discourses, adaptability of interpretation/misinterpretation and who are sensitive to social and political uses of images.

We are interested in confronting visual projects, whether focused on the origin of art, persistence and recurrence of visual compositions, strict visual presentation, photo-archives, politics, conflicts.

→ Go to the books selection

→ Fill up the form

Warburg and contemporary visual practices

Who is Aby Warburg?

Aby Warburg (1866 - 1929) was born in a banker's family in Hamburg. He studied art history and became an expert in Renaissance art and culture, he was very active in contemporary cultural policies and politics.

His family's wealth allowed him to gather a gigantic collection of books and photographs, which were housed in his Hamburg research institute, the **Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg**.

Books were ordered according to an untraditional system known as '**legge del buon vicinato**' which means that a book not specifically linked to a given section of the library was placed there to suggest new research paths and perspectives.

By doing so Warburg subverted the traditional order of scholarship and overturned methodological boundaries within archeology and art history; by appropriation of alternative methodological systems, such as anthropology, ethnography, philosophy, psychology and aesthetics he foresaw a cultural history of the Mediterranean basin.

Warburg and contemporary visual practices

Warburg is an inspiration for many working in and with images.

His photography based projects are extremely original when compared to academic practice whilst they are close to creative aesthetic such as Surrealism.

He foresaw the '**visual turn**' we live in today, and stated that art was the result of emotion put into shape; he believed that among those some acted as **pathosformel** – a form of an object/art work which carries emotional distress – and that those were travelling in time and space.

The geographical area of concern was the Mediterranean basin; a pathosformel, let's say a snake, would appear again and again, adapting to new contexts as an autonomous energetic impulse.

He perceived images as demons/healing forces: they allowed a suspension, a **Denkraum** – a space for thoughts – during which art could be created as an act of distancing emotion and fear. Images therefore reveal fear, conflict, survivals and

changes in a given culture such as the Mediterranean (a large cultural area that included Germany as well as modern Iraq).

The **autonomous wandering of images in time and space**, their **capability to adapt and subvert meaning**, their **long lasting life** together with **humans' need to create and worship them**, are among the issues Warburg touched upon.

Inspiration for this survey rose from Warburg's two photography projects

Aby Warburg's photographs of the Hopi tribe rituals

During 1895 - 1896 Warburg took a long journey across America where, on the top of a Mesa in Arizona, he witnessed a Hopi Kachina dance.

More than 20 years on he was still impressed by the ritual, among the strongest emotions he ever felt; art, resulting either into a visual pattern or an object or a performance was rooted in mankind's need to keep safe and to react to unknown forces.

Art resulted in an act that reacts to something, an energetic impulse. Warburg's ideas spread out of this experience have become a landmark

in anthropology, visual media history, philosophy, visual and cultural studies.

Warburg took 100 or more photographs with a Kodak 1888's camera - *'you press the button we do the rest'*. The **snapshots** are informed by contemporary ethnographic visual research, and reveal a bad technician as well as an intense observer.

He selected and showed some of the images in slide lectures once he was back in Hamburg, and then stored them in his archive; in 1921 he mounted a slide lectures based on his journey's photographs so to show his psychiatrist that he had gained back emotional and mental strengths, and therefore was able to go back to work (by then he had spent many years in mental hospitals).

The lecture was conceived as a **visual performance**, and Warburg did not want it to be printed. After his death an abridged English version was published and a philological one was printed in German in 1988 with the given title '**A snake ritual**'.

The relevant role of images in the overall narrative was not taken into account by the editors, and only in 1996 most of the photographs were finally printed.

Pueblo Indian tribes were fiercely against publication of photographs of the dance; when an exhibition of Warburg's photographs was due at the Getty Research Institute in Malibu, CA, the American Native community confronted the institution on the premise that no western made images of native rituals could be shown

within the USA law system and the show was put off. Since then his photographs are today at the center of a cultural clash between Western and Native American civilizations.

BilderAtlas Mmenosyne

Soon after the 1921 lecture Warburg was back to work. He came up with a ground-breaking project, in the form of a **visual Atlas** shown in exhibitions and public lectures.

The BilderAtlas Mmenosyne Atlas of visual memory - was made up of photographs he had collected during his life; it focused on tracing **wandering, persistence, mutation and disguise of pathosformeln** in the Mediterranean area from antiquity to 20th century.

Warburg arranged his photographs on 79 panels with **no introduction text or labels**; only the first three panels (A,B,C) give some hint to the meaning of the overall structure.

The Atlas is a tentacular narrative device that relies only on visuality, and opens up an endless possibility of reading it; it anticipates the open source system since it is free of a given and linear order of reading the mounting of images.

The Atlas is still today a work open to discussion and critical assessment in academic discourse; it was initially shown in Rome in an academic lecture (1929) and most of the scholars felt uncomfortable with its premises. In the late '30s Ernst Gombrich recalls

the impossibility of adding captions and texts to Warburg's Atlas, since the overall work refused one and only system of reading, enabling more than one narrative often interwoven with others; the scholar, later to become the director of the Warburg Institute in London, put forward the idea that the Atlas showed how insane Warburg still was, and that creating an alternative system of expression such a mere visual display of photographs was an obvious symptom of his intellectual weakness.

We know today, thanks to Georges Didi -Huberman, that order was not Warburg's main goal, he looked for symptoms, held details highly, searched for genealogy, feared phantoms and rejoiced in discovering hidden associations. The photographs arranged on the panels talk about resurrection and disruption, distance and proximity, identity and migration, conflict and colonization.



Chiara Capodici

Chiara Capodici works in the field of photography since 2005.

She has been as assistant artistic director of Fotografia-festival internazionale di Roma between 2006-08.

In 2008 she set up the books selection for s.t. foto libreria galleria, Rome with Benedetta Cestelli Guidi.

From 2009 to 2016, as part of 3/3, she focused on producing and curating photobooks, but also developing exhibitions and workshops in Italy and abroad, with a special focus on the publishing world.

In January 2017 she opened Leporello, a bookshop devoted to photobooks and not only; an exhibition venue and a project space focused on books and images.

Benedetta Cestelli Guidi

Benedetta Cestelli Guidi has been working on Warburg's uses of photography since her MA in art and cultural history at The Warburg Institute, London.

As lecturer she teaches Documentary photography and national heritage at La Sapienza University, Rome, and has been active in many fields of photography based projects both as curator of contemporary exhibitions/projects and as a scholar in photo archives. In the latter she has put forward a methodology in the evaluation of XIX and XX centuries photography.

From 2008 to 2011 she took part in s.t. foto libreria galleria, Rome, where she was mainly engaged with exhibitions and selections of contemporary books on photography. Books are, as much as photography, among her main passionate interests.