

Robert Smithson's Ghost in 1920s Hamburg: Reading Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas as a Non-Site

Lyndell Brown and Charles Green

Introduction

While we can discern an archival turn in contemporary art – of works such as Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig* (1999) and of exhibitions such as "Deep Storage" (1998) – the aim of this paper is not merely to identify iconologist Aby Warburg as prefiguring that turn, but to read Warburg's last work in relation to Earth artist Robert Smithson's non-sites as a means of opening up discussion on the function of art as archive, and archive as art.¹ The work with which we primarily concern ourselves is Warburg's final unfinished work, *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927-29) – started the same year as the more famous, equally incomplete collection of quoted texts by Walter Benjamin, his *Arcades Project* (1927-1940). Warburg has always been regarded as a canonical but maverick figure: he was a founder of iconology (the study of the historical development of iconographic symbols) and the key figure in the revival of the study of Antique art (late in his life, through the agency of the Warburg Institute, located first in Hamburg and later in London). Robert Smithson was arguably the key conceptualist artist in the transition between modernist and postmodernist art; he was also a prolific and influential writer on contemporary art. Both arrived at theorisations of art as archive and of memory storage by art just at the point that the life of each was tragically cut short.

Our aim here is partly to remove Warburg's last project, surviving as folios of photographs and notes stored at the Warburg Institute, from the domain of his iconologist guardians, in order to place it in the context of contemporary art practice, proposing a new reading of a proto-conceptual work not of a failed historiographic curiosity. Of course, this process is already predicted in the fate of Warburg's *Atlas*; the present Director of the Warburg Institute, Professor Nicholas Mann, announced (with the barest hint of scholarly pride), before we consulted Warburg's final papers, that we should not try to decode the *Atlas*'s meaning, for many German-language researchers tried and failed. Further, one of Warburg's principal disciples and confidantes, Gertrud Bing had scribbled on the back of a

¹This turn has been noted by several scholars. For an examination of this topic in contemporary art see Ingrid Schnaffner and Matthias Winzen (eds.), *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* exhibition catalogue (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1998). See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Atlas: Warburg's Paragon? The End of Collage and Photomontage in Postwar Europe," in Ingrid Schaffner, Matthias Winzen (eds.), *Deep Storage*, 50-60, 53; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive", *October* 88 (Spring 99), 117-45. As background, see also Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 28. For a discussion of archives without museums and a critique of André Malraux's famous metaphor of the museum without walls see Hal Foster, "The Archive Without Museums," *October* 77 (Summer 1996), 97-119.

commentary of Mnemosyne Atlas that

This seems to be a vicious circle: if I have to know the mental life, etc., of whoever uses a symbol in order to interpret it, I cannot use the symbol as a key to the interpretation of that mental life. So why bother about the symbol at all?²

This was, perhaps, a telling admission from within the iconologist citadel, confirming the need for alternative readings of Warburg's misplaced but instructive failure.

The implication of looking at works of art as archives is that they are then necessarily seen as textual, as composed of records and memories that can be read. The *form* of archive-oriented art, often a sort of pseudo-anthropology, has been connected, from the period of Smithson's 1960s work onwards, with a more general reformulation of art and artistic work as "field work" undertaken outside the studio, outside the conventional locus of artistic identity, often as a sort of pseudo-anthropological activity.

This paper explores the affinities between Warburg and Smithson's respective reformulations of historiographic and artistic method. It will argue that Warburg and Smithson made theory by anthologising and anthropologizing. There's a further, more radical affinity: just as Smithson's essays are key art-critical texts, so Mnemosyne inadvertently disorganizes the vocational division between interpreter and creator, for Warburg's investment in detached, scholarly intentionality (and in the status of interpretation as explanatory commentary separate from its objects) was pushed aside by the power of his anthropological montage.

The Non-Site

Drawing on the terminology of Smithson's "Dialectic of Site and Non-Site," let's analyse Mnemosyne as a non-site. To explain the term, it's worth quoting Smithson:

There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quiet catastrophes taking place. The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the non-site, it throws you out to the fringes.³

The panels of Mnemosyne are the central focus – the point of "contained information" or "mirror" – in Warburg's non-site.⁴ This is the non-site, which in turn refers to a scattered network of works of art in churches and museums – the site. Warburg's photographic instructional panels are also without doubt documentary traces of a journey. They self-consciously embody and point us towards a process of spatial reading that resembles Smithson's

²See *verso* of note to Warburg, presumed to be in Gertrud Bing's hand, written approximately 1929 or later, in notes on the reverse of a Mnemosyne Atlas project panel, Warburg Archive folder 108.6 (containing typescript and manuscript notes by Bing, Saxl, Gombrich) which accompanies Mnemosyne VII (final version, 1929-30), held at the Warburg Institute, London.

³Robert Smithson, "Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson: Interview with Avalanche" [1970], in Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), Land and Environmental Art (London: Phaidon, 1998), 202-205, 204.

⁴Smithson writes, "Dialectic of Site and Non-Site/Site/Non-site/1. Open Limits/Closed Limits/2. A Series of Points/An Array of Matter/3. Outer Co-ordinates/Inner Co-ordinates/4. Subtraction/Addition/5. Indeterminate Certainty/Determinate Uncertainty/6. Scattered Information/Contained Information/7. Reflection/Mirror/8. Edge/Centre/9. Some Place (physical)/No Place (abstract)/10. Many/One." (Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), reprinted in Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), Land and Environmental Art (London: Phaidon, 1998), 215-218, 217.)

The Monuments of Passaic (1967) – which consisted in its final form of a negative map – and his Hotel Palenque (1969).

Warburg viewed his panels from an imaginary Olympian vantage point: all the panels look as if they must be legible and so they were intended, although their ordering principle and semantic meanings remain in the end obscure, no matter how long we look at them; they hypothesize the viewer's lack. Similarly, Smithson arranged inchoate, incommensurable images within the neutral container of grids, dissolving the logic of those grids by random processes. He also bracketed artists, designers, and film-makers' works together, especially in his collaged drawings from the early 1960s on. The individual images that he appropriated resonate, legible in themselves, within baroque, bizarre combinations that recall the science-fiction that he was so influenced by.⁵ Smithson's and Warburg's projects are re-presentations. They present found, ready-made elements, organizing them in chains of structural, semantic, and morphological affinities that spiral inwards into endless detail and interpretation. Both Warburg's and Smithson's non-sites point us towards a stratified reading of time.

Mnemosyne's archival structure is analogous to Smithson's concept of an archive composed of samples drawn from and referring to their original terrain. Both Smithson and Warburg present their samples in indexical structures, in apparently neutral containers. More definitively, their works are metonymic representations, far removed from their place of origin.⁶ These metonymic non-sites are obviously made from different materials. Smithson took samples or photographs from the surface of the earth, as we see when we look at his Nonsite, "Line of Wreckage," Bayonne, New Jersey (1968).

Warburg, on the other hand, used photographic representations of art works. An opened folio from his Mnemosyne Atlas folios at the Warburg Institute will show, for example, on the left-hand page, the captions for his Medea panel, and on the right-hand page the photograph of the panel representing many versions of the Death of Orpheus. These pages are ready-mades in the sense that museum photographers made the photographs he collected and organized, and Warburg Library technicians documented the arrangements he created. We need to remember that Warburg, who was independently wealthy and mentally unstable, wrote very, very few essays or books for publication. He was, though, surrounded by loyal and immensely gifted disciples who recorded his thoughts and archived his every note; every post-object artist longs for such help. There were over 60 panels (many less are usually exhibited) and Warburg arranged the contents of each into surprisingly elegant, asymmetrical compositions, making virtuoso use of repetition, geometric inversion, lateral extension and arching shapes.

Warburg saw Mnemosyne as an assembly of forms embodying collective cultural memory from antiquity to the present. He was trying to show us something both specific and ineffable about the temporal and spatial breadth of European art history. Across its panels (its lateral trajectory is crucial), he traced morphological affinities and recurring gestural

⁵For Smithson's collaged drawings, see Eugenie Tsai, Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), especially King Kong Meets the Gem of Egypt (1972) (Tsai, 196), and St John in the Desert (1961-63) (Tsai, 138).

⁶We are prepared to be contradicted on this by our further research or other scholars findings (indications either way would be immensely interesting) but it wouldn't affect the direction of this argument. Craig Owen's essay on Smithson, "Earthwords," is now a revered and canonical text; it's also immensely stimulating and elegant. Nonetheless, despite Owen's persuasive rhetoric, translation and abstraction from one discourse to another are not exclusively rhetorical. Smithson does not set up symbolic narrative chains that lead to allegory. Entropy is not allegorical, though allegory is potentially entropic. Smithson's entropy collapses and degrades meaningful symbolic chains; narratives decay under entropic pressure. See Craig Owens, "Earthwords," October, no. 10 (Fall 1979), 121-130.

motifs by juxtaposing chains of small photographs. Warburg gathered, shuffled and sifted collections of black and white photographs beautifully printed from glass negatives, gradually sorting out sequences of images according to fluid and still-evolving principles of iconological transformation. The criteria are spelt out in slightly earlier essays such as his dissertation on Botticelli (1891), and his paper on Dürer and the Italian Antique (1905-1906). He categorized his panels according to different allegories – Medea or the Death of Orpheus, for example – arguing that these allegories are perpetuated in sublimations from image to image, assuming that the collective mind is connected by the sublimated image’s affect. Warburg’s universalizing theory has parallels with that of Jung, who he admired.⁷ Warburg was also aware of Freud’s theories, and, incidentally, Warburg was much admired by Walter Benjamin. Warburg’s theory assumes that the collective mind is connected through the dynamogram’s affect (an energy charge affective through contact) to the social Mneme. Assuming this residual affective power inside certain gestures, he hoped that his “ghost story for the fully grown-up” would be told through images alone, without captions.⁸ Iconology’s proto-Structuralist dream of functional fluidity is simulated in the Mnemosyne panels. We can at least begin to identify what he was trying to show us. In the Mnemosyne panels, we read a series of Old Master etchings and paintings. We see copies and adaptations from artist to artist, from classical sarcophagi (the source of Warburg’s dynamograms of trauma were intense pagan emotions) to sixteenth century mythological scenes, and finally to the figures in Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe (1863).⁹

Memory Storage or Entropy?

Can it be argued that Warburg advanced a meaningful proposition, able to substitute for words and written text, as he thought he was doing? If not, what is it that we see? Do we simply observe an affinity with postmodern, conceptualist appropriation art in an academic art-historical project made long before conceptualism arrived?

For a start, we need to distinguish three well-known theories of memory storage. Firstly, Mnemosyne implicitly seems to imagine that the artistic archive is a sort of cultural memory-storage device, like the classical wax tablet that preserves impressions; this is effectively the model of Antique mnemonic memory systems and also, implicitly, that of Mnemosyne. Secondly, this is complicated by something very different: Warburg’s theory of pathos formula. According to this, collective cultural memory is inscribed or stored in certain affective gestures called dynamograms.¹⁰ Thirdly, Robert Smithson saw memory as a temporary representation that inevitably either decays or is lost through the process of entropy; the hard disk is wiped. Smithson’s concept of entropy is spelt out in his essay, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967):

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a *jejeune* experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind’s eye the sand box divided

⁷For a discussion of also of Warburg’s close parallels with Nietzsche’s theories on the resurrection of Greek tragedy, see Matthew Rampley “From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg’s Theory of Art” The Art Bulletin vol. LXXIX, no. 1 (March 1997), 41-55.

⁸E.H. Gombrich, Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography (Chicago: University of Chicago: 1970; 2nd edition, 1986), 287. This concept is similar to the affect of mnemonic energy preserved in engrams on the individual nervous system.

⁹Ibid., 273.

¹⁰Warburg clearly saw the double function of memory storage: firstly, of phobic reflexes; and secondly, of pictorial or linguistic reactions. See Sigrid Schade, “Charcot and the Spectacle of the Hysterical Body: The ‘Pathos Formula’ as Aesthetic Staging of Psychiatric Discourse – A Blind Spot in the Reception of Warburg,” Art History, vol. 18, no. 4 (December 1995), 499-517, 501

in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn gray; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of grayness and an increase of entropy.¹¹

Models of memory-as-representation like the second and third models seem to deny the validity of the schema behind Mnemosyne, and are critiques of memory-as-registration.

Now, photographic archives are taken to be storehouses of memory, but photographic narratives in particular decay under the entropic pressure of both natural and cultural processes. Smithson rejected the conventional understanding of photography – that the shutter captures and encapsulates a decisive moment in a memorable form. Smithson understood that photographs document the failure embodied by entropic process, and this explains his acceptance of discursive fluidity. Instead, the photograph represents a stop along a process by which things are sifted, sorted, reassembled and within which they gradually come to rest. Each photograph or work is an arrested, but not a decisive, moment in which the circulation and dissipation of meaning towards entropy is suspended.¹² Both Warburg and Smithson organized photographic traces by archival systems, but this also subjects their archival material to such sedimentary pressures (the immense pressures of coding weighing on mere mute signs; the actual inadequacy of reproduction) that the results of art historical research survive only in highly stressed and unfinishable structures. Smithson used the word “mannerist” to describe such stressed structures. Mnemosyne also shows this entropy in action. The process is latent in Warburg’s Atlas; the defeat of allegory announced in the work’s provisional states may have been (in Warburg’s mind) not altogether unexpected. But Warburg also dissolves the rigid hierarchies of traditional art history: genre, media. High/low divisions disintegrate, replaced by obscurity and fluid, open-ended lines of extension and influence.¹³

Warburg’s disciples optimistically assumed that he had performed a series of definitive allegorical categorizations and was refining a closed but infinitely flexible system, but the viewer (like Warburg, hence his refusal to definitively finish any panel) sees an ever-expanding horizontal proliferation of connectedness arbitrarily contained. Mnemosyne was necessarily unfinishable: it had been shaped by criteria that were essentially arbitrary. The proof, of course, is that Warburg re-defined the field within which he could find dynamograms embodied in images. The moment he extended its scope from Western sculpture and painting to the infinitely extensible field of popular culture and photo-journalism that field became more or less infinite. The viewer then sees an open-ended system composed of representations of works of art seen obscurely at best – in black and white. Warburg’s lecture audiences, in fact, saw even less: they saw his assemblages from a distance, and every image was thus reduced to a tiny rectangle. Works of art became mutated, weird forms, degraded representation, and hence mannerisms.

¹¹Robert Smithson, Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 74.

¹²See Robert A. Sobieszek’s excellent essay, “Robert Smithson: Photo Works,” in Robert A. Sobieszek, Robert Smithson: Photo Works exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993), 10-47, 32.

¹³Only a few Mnemosyne panels, incidentally, include contemporary images, though recent articles misleadingly imply the opposite. A question arises: When Warburg juxtaposes the chariot of Helios with airships, does this represent a sublimation of primitive mythic symbols into modern allegory, or is it a disconnected dynamogram, almost gratuitously, in Warburg’s words, “cut loose from the mint of real life in movement” (Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 250-251), like other disconnected dynamogram networks made possible by the printing press and, presumably, by photography?

The art works reproduced in Warburg's archive therefore emerged from all this like time travellers from the past. So although Warburg's conception of cultural memory transmitted through the affective traces of ancient pagan trauma in a kind of time travel was, first, a textual mode of seeing, it was also, second, a way of seeing in which we are forced to see works of art as if they are strata, snapshots and excerpts. The question is: what are these strata or snapshots indexical of?

This is a crucial question: Warburg was attempting something more complicated than a description of the canonical artistic archive represented by the traces created after information retrieval. His theory of pathos formula – of the dynamogram – was a theory of formulae that triggered memory, but were not memory itself. This is a theory of memory as representation shaping the present, rather than a description of memory as a storehouse, as an archive. Smithson explained this through a slightly different image: memories trap the future (they are a method of representation) and the subject – this time, “the time traveller” – “perceives the gravel and dust of memory on the empty fringes of consciousness.”¹⁴

According to Warburg, his carefully-selected works of art are linked by morphological similarities of gesture and formal arrangement. Even a first glance at Warburg's beautifully printed, warm-toned photographs shows that he was trying to convince both himself and us that dynamograms lay underneath these subjects. Reconstructions of Warburg's lectures and seminars show that he thought an image's archetypal power is innately affective, and that its affect derives from the repetition of gestures perpetuated from Old Master work to Old Master work transmitted towards the present. Warburg traced the transmission of certain poses and gestures, imagining that they have an affect that is subliminal. This affect, he imagined, derives from a chain of half-memories that live on like an aura. Warburg saw a dynamogram as an abstraction of individual works of art, resembling a gesture drawn direct from the Antique. Embedded, somehow, within these gestures are ancient, unresolved traumas that have been sublimated into images. Sometimes these images carry quite contrary significations (and here we see Freud's processes of condensation and inversion at work). Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, for example, restages a latently traumatic image in a contemporary setting: we see a picnic and not the rape-scene from which the composition derives. Matthew Rampley imagines, further, that Warburg's response to Picasso's reprise of Manet's picnic, in *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) would be to interpret that painting as a scene of aggressive desublimation for, according to Warburg's logic of the pathos formula, violent, primitivist and orgiastic scenes of mass-seizure always threatened to uncannily re-surface in acts of cultural recidivism.¹⁵

There is a contradiction. *Mnemosyne* initially implies a particular theory of memory: that memory consists of impressions – of stamps – on the wax-like surface of mental storage capacity. This storage is of two types: first, phobic reflexes; and second, linguistic or pictorial reactions. First, his Atlas examined the “laws according to which image-formed expressions are saved in, or reissue from, the archive of memory.”¹⁶ Remember, Warburg did come into

¹⁴Robert Smithson “The Shape of the Future and Memory” (1966), in Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 332.

¹⁵Matthew Rampley, “Archives of Memory: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*,” in Alex Coles (ed.), *The Optic of Walter Benjamin, de-, dis-, ex-*, vol. 3 (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999), 94-117, 105.

¹⁶Ilsebil Barta Fliedl, quoted in Sigrid Schade, “Charcot and the Spectacle of the Hysterical Body,” 501.

contact with Freud's psychoanalysis during his period of mental illness between 1918-24. Second, Freud (and more recent memory theorists such as Richard Terdiman) similarly consider memory to be a mode of representation. Warburg's ambivalent conception of cultural memory involves both and is a little contradictory. It involves a formulation of the symbol as not simply a mirror of subjective inspiration or expression, but rather a mental-technical function of cultural memory. Warburg seems to implicitly suggest that artists are spoken by the archive of cultural discourse, which is an idea familiar to us from Foucault's archaeology. In a fascinating but flawed essay, Sigrid Schade attempts to link Warburg's "pathos formula" with Charcot's famous staging of his hysteric patients' symptoms in photographic *tableaux vivants* organized according to aesthetic and iconographic models.¹⁷ Schade ultimately but unnecessarily condemns Warburg's staging of iconographic successions as art-historical "truth," arguing that his project was doomed because of the failure of his supposed model (medical photographs from archives). This, however, elides the fact that Warburg chose the medium of photographic reproduction, and this was normative for late nineteenth and early twentieth century art historical connoisseurship, whereas Charcot, through postures and iconographic cues, displaced the artistic terms of specific iconographic models into the medical archive. The link between the Salpêtrière of *fin-de-siècle* Paris and early twentieth century Hamburg is an elegant but ultimately unconvincing caprice, although Schade does provide valuable material about Warburg's familiarity with Freud's concept of memory. She also addresses an issue crucial to this essay: the need to critically re-examine art history's limiting traditional ideas of authorial construction. Warburg accepted these limitations; this is one reason why his fragmented oeuvre has resisted incorporation into mainstream art history.

Neither Smithson nor Warburg seem to have been particularly threatened by the hyper-textual nesting of information or by the messy disorganization (*intrication*, as Georges Didi-Huberman calls it) of both the conception of memory-as-representation and of archives in general.¹⁸ However, each was forced to variably acknowledge the difficulties of closing open systems. And each seems to have been working out theories that detached their archival samples from simple allegorical organization. The accretion of discourse tends towards decay – and this leads away from allegory, despite Craig Owen's arguments. Thus, the intrication of Warburg's dynamograms resembles the second register of Smithson's entropy.

Interpreted in this way, the contradictory dimensions of Warburg's iconological reformulation of art-historical work becomes clear: first, the viewer witnesses something uncanny, which is the failure of montage to constitute itself as a meaningful method of discourse (a process that had been enacted, as Buchloh points out, in Soviet and in Dada photographic discourse in the 1920s as well). Second, *Mnemosyne* disorganized the vocational division between interpreter and creator, and so poses problems for our view of Warburg. Warburg's concepts of the dynamogram and pathos formula, we insist, still require rigorous critique: the pathos formula has been loosely compared by many writers, for example, with Barthes' theory of the photographic punctum, but it is far from clear what, if anything, such a comparison demonstrates. Entropy explains the discrepancy between Warburg's own critical investment in intentionality and the near-total obscurity and illegibility of the result, except as fairly self-evident tautologies and monuments to Warburg's charismatic personality. Warburg thought he was creating a structure of implicit

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Georges Didi-Huberman, lecture on Warburg's concepts of dynamograms and pathos formula, Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris, February 2000, author's notes.

but legible interpretation – an explanatory commentary separate from and about its objects – but this was defeated by his system, which blurs the distinction. On the other hand, Smithson’s understanding that photographs document the failure embodied in entropic processes and the resultant illegibility of images meant that he was completely at ease with the fact of discursive fluidity. Smithson understood that a chain of linked signs or photographs would be incidents in a process of decay. Warburg’s unfinished archive survives in a similar way, since scholars now gather disconnected glimmerings of the sense of his Atlas with only the greatest difficulty. What they see is a textual opacity and semantic transparency – they see aura in the age of and as the result of photographic reproduction – unrelated to Mnemosyne’s synthetic, anti-iconographic intention. What they extract is more akin to iconography than iconology.¹⁹

Just as Smithson develops a new idea of artistic work – a post-studio art in which the work of art is a discursive field of which the traces are the artist’s films, photographs and essays – so Warburg’s constantly changing collection of images results in dysfunctional research – dysfunctional in the sense that it does not communicate in a legible fashion to its speech community.²⁰

Mnemosyne’s Success and Failure

Mnemosyne is, at first sight, more comprehensible if it is placed alongside examples of a particular type of art-theoretical investigation conducted in quasi-philosophical experiments by 1960s conceptualists. Their activities required the blurring of the difference between theoretical and artistic work. If Mnemosyne is compared with Smithson’s The Monuments of Passaic (1967), we see Mnemosyne as a project inquiring, not into the status of art as such, but into the nature of image production and mutation. The reason to do so is this: its montages fail, to say the least, as efficient academic texts, but they do start making sense when re-evaluated as non-sites, for this model of the archive does not retrieve information but does map entropy – not just map image decay but also entropy’s second effect, its new sub-registers of meaning and language. On the other hand, a superficially plausible comparison with Joseph Cornell’s textually complex boxes, such as The Crystal Cage [Portrait of Berenice] (1934-67) would be misleading, since the organizing principle of Cornell’s boxes is different.²¹ Cornell’s collections are based on a search for a different type of non-morphological correspondence between elements – a search method that is connected instead with a completely different type of storage method – the cabinet of curiosities or the wunderkammer. We mention this storage system in order to immediately file it away, for it is not, strictly speaking, relevant to this inquiry. Neither Warburg nor

¹⁹We are eliding the fact that Warburg is not simply an iconologist – he employs the method of iconology (the study of the historical and sociological development of iconographic symbols) through such dazzling, obscure scholarship that scholars often mistake his project as iconological in aim. However, Warburg was attempting something much more ambitious: to develop a psychological (psychoanalytic) history of affective gestures (called pathos formula, dynamograms) in art. See Matthew Rampley, “From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg’s Theory of Art”, Art Bulletin, vol. LXXIX, no. 1 (March 1997), 41-55.

²⁰Forster points out that Warburg invents a comprehensive discipline of cultural studies, beyond the conventional art history of his time. See Kurt W. Forster, “Introduction”, in Aby Warburg, The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute 1999), 1-75, 39.

²¹According to Charles Simic, “[b]oth Baudelaire and Emerson believed in the mystic religion of universal analogy, but while they sought its manifestations in nature, Cornell found his “forest of symbols” in the city. Somewhere in the island of Manhattan, there are, he believed, a few objects, dispersed in unknown locations, that rightly belong together despite being seemingly incompatible in appearance” (Charles Simic, “Forgotten Games,” New York Review of Books, vol. XLVII, no 7 (27 April, 2000), 4-7, 6.)

Smithson were in the least interested in rendering their material wonderful or “aesthetic” through artistic mediation, juxtaposition and beautification. Almost the reverse: both were engaged in the process of creating putatively meaningful new types of discourse.

What does a page from Mnemosyne actually conjure? What did Warburg think we might extract from second-generation (which is to say, increasingly decayed, entropic) black and white photographic representations? The answer hinges on Warburg’s initial assumption that the photographic document would be like text: it would be a neutral window onto its referent, and that the work of art was re-presented in the photograph. His assumption is similar to that of first generation conceptualists, who assumed that language was as neutral as images were not. Similar, except that Warburg chose to assume that the process of photographic reproduction was neutral – that what we see when we see a photograph is not a photograph, but an impoverished version of its subject. He thought, in effect, that when we see a photograph we see an entropic version of the referent.

Warburg’s need for distance (his need to contain the “chaos of unreason” by a “filter of retrospective reflection”) was threatened by modern technologies that eliminate distance, such as telephony and even photography.²² He felt, with foreboding, that memory arms the subject against the allure of mass-seizure, for it widens the gap between calm contemplation and orgiastic surrender to emotions.²³ This need to distance the subject finds its opposite in Smithson’s confident delirium. Smithson put “himself” in the frame, even in Spiral Jetty at the center of his photographic and cinematic documentation, whereas Warburg imagined that he could be detached from the process he documented – that he could remain a scholar. But, like Smithson, he was charting images subject to entropic processes. Warburg thought he was mapping cultural survival, but we see that he was mapping the process of entropy. As an iconologist, Warburg was restricted by the scholarly categorization of research, though he rarely allowed such criteria to inhibit his method. Smithson could legitimize the indeterminacy of meaning because this was totally consistent with the double flow of entropy towards decay and into eddies, into sub-registers of meaning and language. As a post-studio artist, Smithson positioned himself as a particularly new kind of expert – an artist who would move backwards and forwards between fictional and factual material. As a scholarly researcher, Warburg implied that there was sense to be made from his refusal to articulate Mnemosyne in language, but it was never clear whether this could be extracted, since the process of “how” it would be read was so problematic.

Remember, Warburg started work on Mnemosyne in 1927, approximately the same time as Benjamin commenced his Arcades Project, and fully four decades before Smithson’s major works. Mnemosyne was not “behind” the times, nor does it appear after Benjamin’s deconstruction of the modernist project. It’s anachronistic to fail to note its modernist date – and to then simply see it through the retro lens of postmodern style, as if Mnemosyne resembles Mark Dion’s vitrines more than Benjamin’s dossiers.²⁴ But it’s also mistaken to disallow Mnemosyne’s status as artistic research because “art is made by artists” at the very moment when others – Marcel Duchamp for example – had abandoned such criteria,

²²Rampley “Archives of Memory,” 109.

²³Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 82.

²⁴Forster points out that Warburg’s “practice embodied a modernity of which he himself was largely unaware,” despite his archaic 19th century language. See Forster, “Introduction,” 49.

substituting the definition that art is art if it is discursively placed as art. Our point is that Mnemosyne escapes the constraints of intentionality, and that though these constraints were not an obstacle to his project, they ensured its obscurity. This is no more surprising than Benjamin's recourse, at exactly the same time, to systems-based constraints based on archival methodology. Mnemosyne both articulates a profoundly detailed map of art and it inadvertently problematizes the figures of the artist in the studio and the scholar in the library.

The Artist in the Studio and the Scholar in the Library

Around 1888, as Aby Warburg analyzed Botticelli's great mythological paintings, he came to wonder, in Gombrich's words, "how Botticelli and his patrons imagined antiquity, what ideas were evoked in their minds by the stories they read in Ovid and in Ovid's Renaissance imitators."²⁵ Gombrich insists that Warburg was less interested in assuming that text and art work are identical than in reconstructing the conception of the work. In other words, he wanted to understand artistic and cultural specificity. We would think, seventy years after Warburg's death, that few people would still bother to try to explain art by the biography of the artist. After all, a host of modernist and then postmodern artists and writers, from Joyce through Beckett through Smithson to the present, have challenged the biographical fallacy that the work of art is the reflection of the artist. Narratologist Mieke Bal updates and complicates Warburg's critique in her recent book, Quoting Caravaggio. First, she denies that an appeal to the artist's intentions explains a work; second, she supplements this with a critique of psychoanalytic criticism's unrestrained tendency to projection, turning effect into intention.²⁶ As she says, if we simply exchange the painter's intention with blind obedience to that of his patrons and their programs (or, more recently, to discourses of difference), we still end up with an intentionalism limited to a superior version of speculation about personality. After pondering the way in which contemporary critics project their worries onto Caravaggio, she contends that "the subject's agency, which matters in a way that his or her intention or psychic make-up does not, consists not of inventing but of intervening, of a 'supplementation' that does not replace the image but adds to it."²⁷

In other words, and without in any way eliding its dimension as an emblem of historiography, Mnemosyne has a double existence: its biographical significance in no way negates its occupation of another terrain, that of entropy. Historiography and its object – art – fit seamlessly together precisely because Mnemosyne is now positioned in exhibitions and commentary as art – as the precursor of particular answers to a set of artistic problems, familiar to postcolonial theorists, in which, as a solution, art objects are nested through photographic reproduction within other art objects.²⁸ The medium of archival photography (not so-called artistic photography) preserves the frame between primary art object and secondary art-commentary. This was indispensable to the latter's ability to constitute itself as

²⁵Ibid., 56.

²⁶Mieke Bal, Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 11.

²⁷Bal, Quoting Caravaggio, 13. She repeats theorist Judith Butler's astute refusal to replace "the intentional subject with a personified 'construction,' which, as she puts it, 'belongs at the grammatical site of the subject'" (Bal, Quoting Caravaggio, 14).

²⁸See Nicholas Thomas, Possessions (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999). Thomas eloquently explains the implications of preserving framing boundaries within art works, locating this as a characteristic of settler society artists (Colin McCahon in New Zealand, Margaret Preston in Australia) in their bracketing of primitive motifs and modes of representation within works rather than sublimating them into an overarching primitivist modification of artistic syntax, as did primitivising Modernist artists in Europe such as Matisse and Picasso.

anthropological archivism. Warburg's exit from a recognizably historiographic terrain (proven by the inability of iconologists to make really useful sense or use of Mnemosyne) occurs independently of archival-oriented art of the same period. How aware was he, given Kurt Forster's insistence on his progressive attitudes to art, of contemporary developments within photography? Did Warburg know, for example, of the work of August Sander? Many prohibitions – of disciplinary integrity, of the need to guard against projecting a retrospective desire for a grandfather figure – in all likelihood block iconology's ability to respond to art after conceptualism and art theory's ability to ask useful questions about Warburg. Most of all, Mnemosyne appears to be both inside and outside the imaginary construction called art history. The iconologist emerges as an artist/author taking the history of art as a field of ready-mades and thus as the creator of a discursive field adrift, after his death, within the historiography of iconology.

What is at stake in this discussion? Have we been involved in nothing more than academic hairsplitting about the interpretation of a failed hermeneutics for which most of us feel either no connection at all – since it appears to evoke a vanished world of antiquarian certainties – or for which we feel something equally irrelevant: a misplaced nostalgia for a lost world of masterpieces? So what, in the end, is the significance of Mnemosyne, especially if we move it outside the domain of its iconologist guardians? Warburg's associate, Fritz Saxl, suggested that Warburg was attempting to move beyond the limit of art history's constructions of the thinking, viewing subject.²⁹ This is true and sounds reassuringly contemporary, but Mnemosyne (in Antique mythology, the Mother of the Muses), also has the unwelcome, truth-telling ability of a Cassandra, warning us that many of the most optimistic assumptions behind the archival turn – most especially, that an archive is a repository of memory – need to be subjected to the most searching and sceptical gaze.

©Copyright retained by Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, 2001.

Author Credit

Lyndell Brown is an artist; she is also completing a PhD in the School of Art History and Theory at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales. In 1989, Lyndell Brown and Charles Green commenced working together in a long-term collaboration. Their work is in several major public and private collections, and they have received many awards and residencies, including the Asialink residency at Sanskriti Kendra in Delhi, India in early 1998. They are represented by Grant/Pirrie Gallery, Sydney. Dr Charles Green is an artist and a senior lecturer in the School of Fine Arts, Classical Studies and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne, and is currently writing a history of Australian art after 1968 with the assistance of an Australian Research Council Large Grant. His most recent book is The Third Hand: Artist Collaborations from Conceptualism to Postmodernism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), and he is also the author of Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art, 1970-94 (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995).

²⁹See Kurt W. Forster, "Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents" October no. 77 (Summer 1996), 5-24; Warburg believed, in a mystic leap of faith, that his library was a psychic battery for currents of ideas (12).

Notes in sequence of appearance in text.

¹This turn has been noted by several scholars. For an examination of this topic in contemporary art see Ingrid Schnaffner and Matthias Winzen (eds.), Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art exhibition catalogue (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1998). See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Atlas: Warburg's Paragon? The End of Collage and Photomontage in Postwar Europe," in Ingrid Schnaffner, Matthias Winzen (eds.), Deep Storage, 50-60, 53; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive", October 88 (Spring 99), 117-45. As background, see also Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 28. For a discussion of archives without museums and a critique of André Malraux's famous metaphor of the museum without walls see Hal Foster, "The Archive Without Museums," October 77 (Summer 1996), 97-119.

²See verso of note to Warburg, presumed to be in Gertrud Bing's hand, written approximately 1929 or later, in notes on the reverse of a Mnemosyne Atlas project panel, Warburg Archive folder 108.6 (containing typescript and manuscript notes by Bing, Saxl, Gombrich) which accompanies Mnemosyne VII (final version, 1929-30), held at the Warburg Institute, London.

³Robert Smithson, "Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson: Interview with Avalanche" [1970], in Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), Land and Environmental Art (London: Phaidon, 1998), 202-205, 204.

⁴Smithson writes, "Dialectic of Site and Non-Site/Site/*Non-site*/1. Open Limits/*Closed Limits*/2. A Series of Points/*An Array of Matter*/3. Outer Co-ordinates/*Inner Co-ordinates*/4. Subtraction/*Addition*/5. Indeterminate Certainty/*Determinate Uncertainty*/6. Scattered Information/*Contained Information*/7. Reflection/*Mirror*/8. Edge/*Centre*/9. Some Place (physical)/*No Place (abstract)*/10. Many/*One*." (Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), reprinted in Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), Land and Environmental Art (London: Phaidon, 1998), 215-218, 217.)

⁵For Smithson's collaged drawings, see Eugenie Tsai, Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), especially King Kong Meets the Gem of Egypt (1972) (Tsai, 196), and St John in the Desert (1961-63) (Tsai, 138).

⁶We are prepared to be contradicted on this by our further research or other scholars findings (indications either way would be immensely interesting) but it wouldn't affect the direction of this argument. Craig Owen's essay on Smithson, "Earthwords," is now a revered and canonical text; it's also immensely stimulating and elegant. Nonetheless, despite Owen's persuasive rhetoric, translation and abstraction from one discourse to another are not exclusively rhetorical. Smithson does not set up symbolic narrative chains that lead to allegory. Entropy is not allegorical, though allegory is potentially entropic. Smithson's entropy collapses and degrades meaningful symbolic chains; narratives decay under entropic pressure. See Craig Owens, "Earthwords," October, no. 10 (Fall 1979), 121-130.

⁷For a discussion of also of Warburg's close parallels with Nietzsche's theories on the resurrection of Greek tragedy, see Matthew Rampley "From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Theory of Art" The Art Bulletin vol. LXXIX, no. 1 (March 1997), 41-55.

⁸E.H. Gombrich, Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography (Chicago: University of Chicago: 1970; 2nd edition, 1986), 287. This concept is similar to the affect of mnemonic energy preserved in engrams on the individual nervous system.

⁹Ibid., 273.

¹⁰Warburg clearly saw the double function of memory storage: firstly, of phobic reflexes; and secondly, of pictorial or linguistic reactions. See Sigrid Schade, "Charcot and the Spectacle of the Hysterical Body: The 'Pathos Formula' as Aesthetic Staging of Psychiatric Discourse – A Blind Spot in the Reception of Warburg," Art History vol. 18, no. 4 (December 1995), 499-517, 501

¹¹Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 74.

¹²See Robert A. Sobieszek's excellent essay, "Robert Smithson: Photo Works," in Robert A. Sobieszek, Robert Smithson: Photo Works exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993), 10-47, 32.

¹³Only a few Mnemosyne panels, incidentally, include contemporary images, though recent articles misleadingly imply the opposite. A question arises: When Warburg juxtaposes the chariot of Helios with airships, does this represent a sublimation of primitive mythic symbols into modern allegory, or is it a disconnected dynamogram, almost gratuitously, in Warburg's words, "cut loose from the mint of real life in movement" (Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 250-251), like other disconnected dynamogram networks made possible by the printing press and, presumably, by photography?

¹⁴Robert Smithson "The Shape of the Future and Memory" (1966), in Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 332.

¹⁵Matthew Rampley, "Archives of Memory: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project and Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas," in Alex Coles (ed.), The Optic of Walter Benjamin, de-, dis-, ex-, vol. 3 (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999), 94-117, 105.

¹⁶Ilsebil Barta Fliedl, quoted in Sigrid Schade, "Charcot and the Spectacle of the Hysterical Body," 501.

¹⁷Ibid..

¹⁸Georges Didi-Huberman, lecture on Warburg's concepts of dynamograms and pathos formula, Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris, February 2000, author's notes.

¹⁹We are eliding the fact that Warburg is not simply an iconologist – he employs the method of iconology (the study of the historical and sociological development of iconographic symbols) through such dazzling, obscure scholarship that scholars often mistake his project as iconological in aim. However, Warburg was attempting something much more ambitious: to develop a psychological (psychoanalytic) history of affective gestures (called pathos formula, dynamograms) in art. See Matthew Rampley, "From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg's Theory of Art", Art Bulletin, vol. LXXIX, no. 1 (March 1997), 41-55.

²⁰Forster points out that Warburg invents a comprehensive discipline of cultural studies, beyond the conventional art history of his time. See Kurt W. Forster, "Introduction", in Aby Warburg, The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute 1999), 1-75, 39.

²¹According to Charles Simic, "[b]oth Baudelaire and Emerson believed in the mystic religion of universal analogy, but while they sought its manifestations in nature, Cornell found his "forest of symbols" in the city. Somewhere in the island of Manhattan, there are, he believed, a few objects, dispersed in unknown locations, that rightly belong together despite being seemingly incompatible in appearance" (Charles Simic, "Forgotten Games," New York Review of Books, vol. XLVII, no 7 (27 April, 2000), 4-7, 6).

²²Rampley "Archives of Memory," 109.

²³Gombrich, Aby Warburg, 82.

²⁴Forster points out that Warburg's "practice embodied a modernity of which he himself was largely unaware," despite his archaic 19th century language. See Forster, "Introduction," 49.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 56.

²⁶Mieke Bal, Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 11.

²⁷Bal, Quoting Caravaggio, 13. She repeats theorist Judith Butler's astute refusal to replace "the intentional subject with a personified 'construction,' which, as she puts it, 'belongs at the grammatical site of the subject'" (Bal, Quoting Caravaggio, 14).

²⁸See Nicholas Thomas, Possessions (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999). Thomas eloquently explains the implications of preserving framing boundaries within art works, locating this as a characteristic of settler society artists (Colin McCahon in New Zealand, Margaret Preston in Australia) in their bracketing of primitive motifs and modes of representation within works rather than sublimating them into an overarching primitivist modification of artistic syntax, as did primitivising Modernist artists in Europe such as Matisse and Picasso.

²⁹See Kurt W. Forster, "Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents" October no. 77 (Summer 1996), 5-24; Warburg believed, in a mystic leap of faith, that his library was a psychic battery for currents of ideas (12).



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Brown, L.;Green, C.

Title:

Robert Smithson's ghost in 1920s Hamburg: reading Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas as a non-site

Date:

2002

Citation:

Brown, L., & Green, C. (2002). Robert Smithson's ghost in 1920s Hamburg: reading Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas as a non-site. *Visual Resources: an International Journal of Documentation*, 18(2), 167-181.

Publication Status:

Published

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34822>