

ATLAS

How to carry the world on one's back?

Starting from the *Mnemosyne Atlas*

Atlas is the name given in Greek mythology to a titan who, along with his brother Prometheus, contested the power of the gods of Olympus in order to make that power available to man. Legend has it that while Prometheus had his liver torn out by a vulture in the far East, Atlas was forced (in the West, between Andalusia and Morocco), to bear on his shoulders the weight of the celestial vault. It is also said, that from this weight he gained an unsurpassable knowledge of the world and an – albeit hopeless – wisdom. He is the ancestor of astronomers and geographers; some even say he was the first philosopher. He gave his name to a mountain (Mount Atlas), to an ocean (the Atlantic), and to an anthropomorphic architectural form (an atlas or atlantes) which is designed to support an entablature.

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Hannah Höch.
Album, 1933.
Collage of newspaper cuttings,
36 x 28 x 3 cm.
Berlinsche Galerie
- Landesmuseum
für Moderne Kunst,
Fotografie und
Architektur

Atlas, finally, gave his name to a *visual form of knowledge*: a gathering of geographical maps in a volume, and more generally, a collection of images intended to bring before our eyes, in a systematic or problematic way – even a poetic way, at the risk of being erratic, if not surrealist – a whole multiplicity of things gathered there through

elective affinities, to use the words of Goethe. The atlas of images became a scientific genre in itself in the 18th century (we can think of the plates of *l'Encyclopédie*) and it developed considerably in the 19th and 20th centuries. There are very serious atlases, very useful atlases – which are often very beautiful – in the life sciences (for example, the collections by Ernst Haeckel on jelly fish and other marine animals); there are more hypothetical atlases (for example, in the domain of archaeology); there are absolutely detestable atlases in the fields of anthropology and psychology (for example, *L'Atlas de l'homme criminel* [The Atlas of the Criminal Man] by Cesare Lombroso, or certain collections of “racial” photographs made by some pseudo-scholars in the 19th century).

In the visual arts, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* of images, composed by Aby Warburg between 1924 and 1929, and yet left unfinished, remains for any art historian – and even for any artist today – a reference and an absolutely fascinating case-study. Warburg completely renewed our way of understanding images. He is to art history what Freud, his contemporary, is to psychology: he opened the understanding of art to radically new questions, those concerning unconscious memory in particular. *Mnemosyne* is his paradoxical masterpiece and his methodological testament: it gathers all of the objects of his research in an apparatus that is also a reaction to two fundamental experiences: that of madness, and that of war. It can therefore be considered a documentary history of the Western imagination (as such, the inheritor of the *Disparates* and the *Caprichos* of Goya) and as a tool for understanding the political violence of images in history (comparable, as such, to a collection of *Desastres*).

At the montage table

ATLAS. How to carry the world on one's back? is an interdisciplinary exhibition which crosses the 20th and 21st centuries by taking the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as its point of departure. In spite of the differences of method and content which might separate the research of a historian-philosopher from the work of a visual artist, what is striking is their common *heuristic* – or experimental – method when based on a *montage of heterogeneous images*. We discover that Warburg shares with the artists of his time the same passion for an *operating visual affinity*, which makes him the contemporary of avant-garde artists (Kurt Schwitters or László Moholy-Nagy), of photographers of the “documentary style” (August Sander or Karl Blossfeldt), of avant-garde filmmakers (Dziga Vertov or Sergei Eisenstein), of writers who employed literary montage (Walter Benjamin or Benjamin Fondane), or even surrealist poets and artists (Georges Bataille or Man Ray).

The *ATLAS* exhibition was not conceived to bring together beautiful artefacts, but rather to understand how certain artists work – beyond the question of any masterpieces – and how this work can be considered from the perspective of an authentic method, and, even, a non-standard *transverse knowledge* of our world. You will not see, therefore, Paul Klee's beautiful watercolours, but instead his modest herbarium and the graphic or theoretical ideas which came of it; you will not see Josef Albers' modern squares, but instead his photographic album devoted to pre-Columbian architecture; you will not see Robert Rauschenberg's immense tableaux, but instead a series of photographs uniting objects both modest and heterogeneous; you will not see the coloured splendours of Gerhard Richter, but a section of montages created for his ongoing *Atlas*; you will not see Sol LeWitt's cubic structures, but instead his photographs of the walls of New York. In preference to the *tableaux* (the result of work) we have chosen, for this occasion, *tables* (as operating spaces, surfaces for play or for getting down to work). And we will have discovered in this way that the so-called “moderns” are no less subversive than the “post-moderns”, and that the latter are no less methodical and concerned with form than the “moderns”... This is a way of recounting the history of the visual arts outside academic art criticism's historical and stylistic outlines.

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Piecing together the order of things

When we arrange different images or different objects — playing cards, for example — on a table, we are free to modify constantly their configuration. We can make piles or constellations. We can discover new analogies, new trajectories of thought. By modifying the order, we can arrange things so that *images take positions*.

A table is not made for definitively classifying, for exhaustively making an inventory, or for cataloguing once and for all — as in a dictionary, an archive or an encyclopaedia — but instead for gathering segments, or parcelling out the world, while respecting its multiplicity and its heterogeneity — and for giving a *legibility* to the underlying relations.

This is why *ATLAS* shows the game to which numerous artists have given themselves, this “infinite natural history” (according to Paul Klee) or that “atlas of the impossible” (according to Michel Foucault regarding the disconcerting erudition of Jorge Luis Borges). We can discover, then, in what sense contemporary artists are “scholars” or inventors of a special genre: they gather the scattered pieces of the world as would a child or a rag-and-bone man — two figures to whom Walter Benjamin compared the authentic materialist scholar. They bring together things outside

of normal classifications, and glean from these affinities a new kind of knowledge which opens our eyes to certain unperceived aspects of our world and to the unconscious of our vision.

Piecing together the order of places

To make an atlas is to reconfigure space, to redistribute it, in short, to redirect it: to dismantle it where we thought it was continuous; to reunite it where we thought there were boundaries. Arthur Rimbaud once cut up a geographical atlas in order to record, on the pieces obtained, his personal iconography. Later, Marcel Broodthaers, On Kawara and Guy Debord invented several forms of alternative geographies. Warburg, for his part, had already understood that every image — every production of

Aby Warburg.
*Der Bilderatlas
Mnemosyne* [Atlas
Mnemosyne]
(panel 7),
1929-2010.
Courtesy of the
Warburg Institute,
London





Paul Klee.
*Pflanzen auf
schwarz grundier-
tem Papier* [Plants
on paper primed
with black paint],
ca. 1930. Plants on
primed paper,
46.4 x 30.4 cm.
Zentrum Paul Klee,
Berne. Gift of the
Klee family

culture in general – is the crossing of numerous *migrations*: it is to Baghdad, for example, that he went to find unperceived meanings of certain frescoes of the Italian Renaissance.

There are many contemporary artists who are not content to rely solely on the landscape to tell us about a country: this is why they bring together, on the same surface – or plate of an atlas – different ways of representing space. It is a way of seeing the world and of going through it according to *heterogeneous viewpoints* combined with one another, as we see in the works of Alighiero e Boetti, Dennis Oppenheim or, more generally, in the way that the urban metropolis was envisaged, from *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov to recent installations by Harun Farocki.

Piecing together the order of time

If the atlas appears as an incessant work of re-composing of the world, it is first of all because the world itself does not cease to undergo decomposition upon decomposition. Bertolt Brecht said of the “dismantling of the world” that it is “the true subject of art” (it should be enough, to understand this, to think of *Guernica*). Warburg, by contrast, saw cultural history as a genuine field of conflict, a “psychomachia”, a “titanomachia”, and a perpetual “tragedy”. We could say that many artists adopted this point of view by reacting against the historical tragedies of their time with a work in which montage, once again, played the central role: we can think of the photomontages of John Heartfield in the 1930’s, or more recently, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, and the work of artists like Walid Raad or Pascal Convert.

It is therefore time itself which becomes visible in the montage of images. It is up to everyone – artist or scholar, thinker or poet – to make such a visibility into a *power to see the times*: a resource for observing history, for undertaking its archaeology

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and its political critique, for “dismantling” it in order to imagine alternative models.

Georges Didi-Huberman

Aby Warburg.
War photographs,
1914–1918.
Black-and-white
photographs,
various sizes.
Courtesy of the
Warburg Institute,
London

List of participants

Francesc Abad • Ignasi Aballí • James Agee • Vyacheslav Akhunov
• Josef Albers • Alighiero e Boetti • German anonymus • Roman
anonymus • Louis Aragon • Hans Arp • John Baldessari • Georges
Bataille • *Bauhaus-Alben* • Samuel Beckett • Bernd and Hilla Becher
• Walter Benjamin • Ernst Benkard • Karl Blossfeldt • Erwin Blumenfeld
• Mel Bochner • Christian Boltanski • Jorge Luis Borges • Brassäi
• Bertolt Brecht • George Brecht • André Breton • Marcel Broodthaers
• Stanley Brouwn • Jacob Burckhardt • Victor Burgin • Lewis Carroll
• James Coleman • Pascal Convert • DADACO • Salvador Dalí • Hanne
Darboven • Moira Davey • Guy Debord • Fernand Deligny • Ernesto
de Martino • Marcel Duchamp • Max Ernst • Walker Evans • Öyvind
Fahlström • Harun Farocki • Hans-Peter Feldmann • Robert Filliou
• Peter Fischli and David Weiss • Alain Fleischer • Benjamin Fondane
• Thomas Geve • Alberto Giacometti • Jean-Luc Godard • Francisco
de Goya • George Grosz • Hans Haacke • Ernst Haeckel • Raymond
Hains • John Heartfield • Susan Hiller • Hannah Höch • Roni Horn
• Douglas Huebler • On Kawara • Mike Kelley • Paul Klee • John Latham
• Le Corbusier • Zoe Leonard • Sol LeWitt • El Lissitzky • Ghérasim
Luca • Master of the Codex Coburgensis • Man Ray • Piero Manzoni
• Étienne-Jules Marey • Gordon Matta-Clark • Henri Michaux • Matt
Mullican • László Moholy-Nagy • Bruce Nauman • Dennis Oppenheim
• Ulrike Ottinger • Amédée Ozenfant • Jean Painlevé • Giuseppe Penone
• Sigmar Polke • Walid Raad • Robert Rauschenberg • Gerhard Richter
• Arthur Rimbaud • Pedro G. Romero • Charles Ross • Dieter Roth
• Thomas Ruff • Naomi Tereza Salmon • August Sander • Meyer Schapiro
• Franz Schubert • Kurt Schwitters • Claude Simon • Robert Smithson

• Alfred Stieglitz • Władysław Strzemiński • Antoni Tàpies • Stefan Themerson • Rosemarie Trockel • Kurt Tucholsky • Valcárcel Medina • Karl Valentin • *Variétés* (magazine) • Jacques Villeglé • *Vu* (magazine) • Simon Wachsmuth • Franz Erhard Walther • Aby Warburg • Christopher Williams

Activities

Georges Didi-Huberman. *Presentation of ATLAS. How to carry the world on one's back?*

Lecture. November 26, 2010

Sabatini Building, Auditorium, 19:30 h

Fuge of Ideas. Passion, Knowledge and Memory in Aby Warburg's Theory of the Image.

International congress. March 4 – 5, 2011

Nouvel Building, Auditorium 400

For this international congress, experts on the history and theory of the image have been invited to come together to debate the repercussions of Warburg's project on knowledge and critical interpretation of contemporary visual culture. The seminar is divided into four roundtables that attempt to interrogate the historical and intellectual coordinates of Warburg's project, and then to discuss the primary questions about the nature of the image formulated in *Atlas Mnemosyne* that resonate in current debates.

Participants:

Javier Arnaldo, Jesús Carrillo, Lorraine Daston, Georges Didi-Huberman, Aurora Fernández Polanco, Christian Jacob, Juan José Lahuerta, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Keith Moxey, Matthew Rampley, Elena Tavani, Sigrid Weigel and Claudia Wedepohl.

Offered for one academic credit at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Universidad Carlos III, Universidad Complutense y Universidad Rey Juan Carlos.

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**Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina Sofía**

Sabatini building

Santa Isabel, 52

Nouvel building

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Museum hours

Monday to Saturday

from 10.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m.

Sundays

from 10.00 a.m. to 14.30 p.m.

Closed tuesdays

Galleries close 15 minutes
prior to Museum closing

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26 November 2010 - 28 March 2011

Images

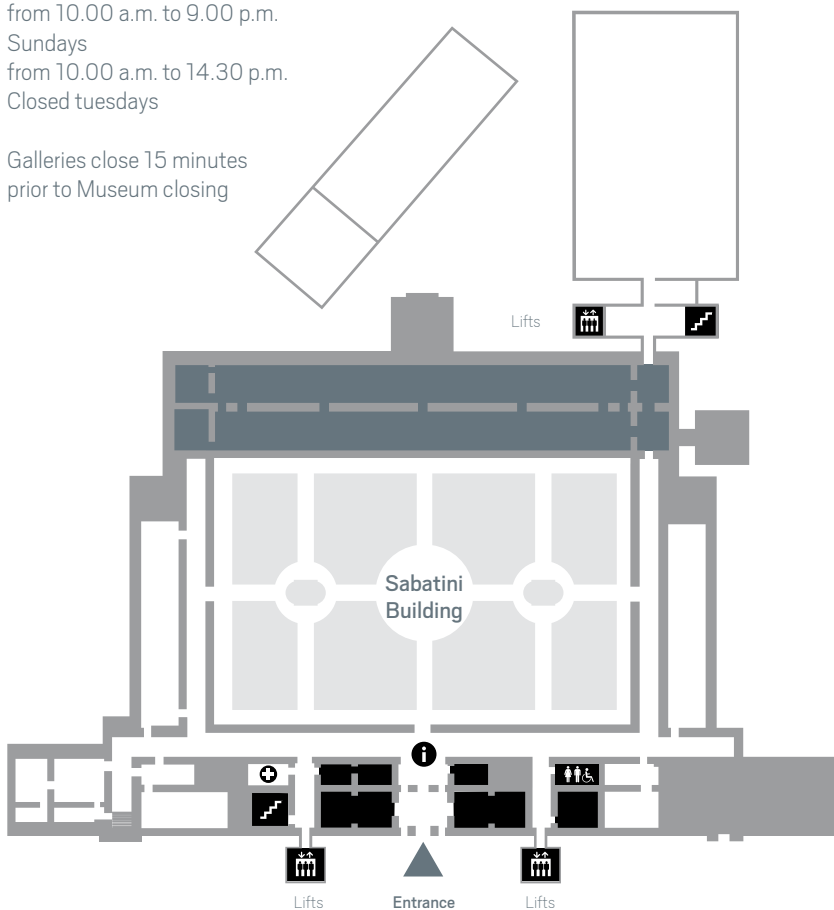
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© Paul Klee, VEGAP. Madrid, 2010

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