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In Practice

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In the very latest epistemologies that are enlivening contemporary image theory, the focus of interest is increasingly being placed on the agency of images – on what images do to us and what they cause us to do. Far from concentrating solely on the image as a finished product, theoreticians are currently examining all methods of production that involve, and rely on, visual documents. In many cases, constructing a work, in this case a work of architecture, involves specific image-use strategies, the importance of which should not be underestimated. From that point of view, the initial development work deserves our utmost attention. If we are interested in carrying out a close examination of the gestures that accompany the mobilisation of thought, it would also be useful to shine some light on the material practices associated with images. 'In Practice' provides us with a unique window into the possibilities that exist in the architectural field as a result of the ability to manipulate images – images that have been composed, juxtaposed or joined together have driven the narration of the project by architects and have influenced the lines along which this project has been developed. The narrative – as it sometimes does in certain travel logbooks – has been inserted between the images, wrapping itself around them and enhancing their impact. Two operations in particular appear to be crucial – harvesting and stimulation. The first of those two operations is that of harvesting – finding, gleaning and picking images with the intention of collecting them, taking them away and hoarding them somewhere. Putting them in sequence. Arranging them so they are all around you. Surrounding yourself. Surrounding yourself with the best ones. Just like you do when choosing your friends. At times, harvesting images can be a hazardous process as you will come across images that undermine your certainties and widen your horizons. And then there is stimulation: drawing from that material the energy (to build and to think), spending time with the material and benefiting from the lively glow of the images themselves to warm up your creativity in order to gain new impetus. Looking at images of all types to stimulate invention. Not using images to confirm an established fact or to consolidate or illustrate a project that has already been developed, but as a means of twisting your original ideas, of doing away with easy ways out and of coming up with new ways of your own instead.

Throughout his life, the art historian, Aby Warburg, collected photographic reproductions of ancient and Renaissance works¹. He tirelessly classified them, observing the tiny differences between them whenever they had topics in common, before returning to them to examine the details. Day after day, he went about his work with his reproductions within reach. His patient and persistent

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handling of images accompanied his thoughts. The images in turn enabled him to come up with some of the phenomena that have shaped and that transcend the history of art. Warburg therefore had a very practical relationship with his iconographic material – he went through the images, kept them under his eyes, pinned them, exposed them, trying to arrange them in pairs and then in combination, seeking echoes or tiny frissons that would enlighten his thoughts. Obsessed with the question as to how gestures are represented, Warburg built up a collection of images depicting intensely emotional states, in which the concept of passion had been pushed to its very limits. Taken together, these images constituted a repertory similar to the ones from which the artists of the past were able to draw inspiration. Warburg elected to use the term “survival” (*Nachleben*) to refer to the phenomenon consisting of updating and redefining motifs elaborated in advance. The period in which images are *harvested* – the gleanings of the images – is not therefore a time of mere accumulation. The only thing that counts is the demonstration that helps us understand the phenomenon of stimulation – the “poetic” phenomenon. How – when one is in contact with the material of the documents – does the possibility of a new artistic project emerge? In what way can we feast on things that already exist in order to invent forms that are entirely new? In order to bring about the decisive transformations achieved by artists by starting out from traditional forms, Warburg sets himself the challenge of compiling a giant visual juxtaposition of the material that constitutes the history of art. In the late 1920s, he set about putting together an Atlas, entitled *Mnemosyne*, which is the Greek word for memory².

With his atlas, Warburg does not seek to put together a simple repertory of canonic, fixed forms. Instead, his interest mainly focuses on the infinite variation of the motifs and on the differences – or distortions – implied by the phenomenon of the survival of forms. As a result of the practical approach he adopts in the document, he in a certain way enables the images to regain a life of their own. He practices – in the strictest sense – a “heuristics of montage” (to use the expression coined by G. Didi-Huberman)³. As a device, the *Mnemosyne* Atlas arranges a vast resource of iconographic material across around sixty screens measuring 1.50 metres by 2 metres and made of black cloth. The photographs, which are in black and white, are hooked onto the screens using hidden clips which enable – and encourage – the images to be moved around and therefore allow the plates to be continually rearranged. *Mnemosyne* does not constitute a final state of affairs; the harvested images are subject to constant manipulation. Each arrangement that was discovered was photographed in turn, always in the same format (18 × 24 cm). By proceeding in this way, Warburg was certain never to lose any stage of the process of mounting the images – all of the different

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states were conserved as all of them are useful as a stimulus for thought. Thanks to this very specific way of putting the concept of a visual document into practice, Warburg explored the possible permutations of the images, causing new problems of a reflective, political and critical nature to arise. *Mnemosyne* intended to resolve an epistemological problem that is inherent to the historical discipline. How and to what end must we rely on images? The problem is a general one that can, for that matter, be carried across into other disciplines. Warburg's proposition is however a novel one – an image is neither exemplary in the common sense of the word, nor is it simply indicative, but it constitutes the very locus of theoretical investigation.

As Didi-Huberman has demonstrated on several occasions, the heuristics of montage, the essential operations of which (dismantling and remounting) are “inflicted” on the material by Warburg, has the radical effect of freeing the images from the ideological narratives in which they have sometimes become caught, as a means of redeploying them in a different way and of re-enacting their complexity and generating new knowledge. Before commencing the task of (re-)composition, Warburg began by cutting out and isolating the various elements, removing them from the categories to which they appeared to belong, sorting them from one another based on all sorts of details; after that, he reorganised those elements and put together the collections once more, thereby causing new relationships between them to emerge. Within the Atlas itself, several regrouping principles exist alongside one another and several logical approaches are being used in parallel. The images may be associated in accordance with formal, gestural or thematic (but rarely chronological) demands. These associations never remain purely formal, however – after all, Warburg opposed all formalist aesthetics.

The *Mnemosyne Atlas* works continually – that, after all, is its essential modus operandi – to show us the point at which the art world brings about metamorphoses and, above all, a metamorphosis of forms, which adapt themselves to the priorities of the humans manipulating them. The *Mnemosyne Atlas* demonstrates, in a very specific way, the point at which the sense of the images fluctuates and the point at which the formal elements are capable of embodying changing meanings. “We are living through nothing other than a metamorphosis”, asserted Warburg in his notes to the “Serpent Ritual” (a serpent, which, for that matter, is itself symbolic of metamorphosis due to the sloughing of its skin).

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1 Cf. Warburg A., *Gesammelte Schriften. Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike* (The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity), Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1998. – Warburg A., “Einleitung zum Mnemosyne-Atlas” (Introduction to the Mnemosyne Atlas) (1929), *Die Beredsamkeit des Leibes. Zur Körpersprache in der Kunst* (The Eloquence of the Body. Body Language in Art), Salzburg-Vienna, Residenz Verlag, 1992, pp. 171-173. – Warburg A., *Schlangensymbol (Serpent Ritual). A Travelogue*, Berlin, Klaus Wagenbach, 1988.

2 Warburg A., *L'Atlas Mnemosyne* (The Mnemosyne Atlas), Paris, L'Écarquillé, 2012.

3 Didi-Huberman G., *L'image survivante* (The Surviving Image), Paris, Minuit, 2002 ; *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet* (Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science), Paris, Minuit, 2011.