The Mnemosyne Atlas as Time Complication
Yann Salzmann

Starting in the summer of 1926, the art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg elaborates the atlas. It is a project heroic through its scope, endless by definition: a cartography of – primarily – European iconography. He named it after Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory. As such, the atlas acknowledged the role of reminiscence in culture, or, as Vico puts it in the New Science, imagination «is nothing but the springing up again of reminiscences, and ingenuity or invention is nothing but the working over of what is remembered.» [1]

The format of the atlas is relatively straightforward. 63 boards, each covered with a black fabric and gathering almost 1000 photographs. They are reproductions of works of art, from a wide array of mediums – paintings, texts, sculptures, graphics – exploring a vast range of prevalent themes in European art history.

Each panel answers to an overarching topic. The first plate investigates the relationship between the cosmos and divinatory instruments, another one the cult of Mithra in the Roman Empire, whilst the ultimate panel puts in relation press pictures of the Locarno treatise and a mass from Rafael.

The following introduction into the fourth panel gives a sense of the inexhaustible wealth of meaning of the atlas. It is not to be understood as a surrealistic dream work, which the atlas sometimes falls victim to. Rather, its meaning emerges through precise storytelling, supported by the spatial geography of the atlas. Through pathways, repetitions, resemblance, the atlas crafts a complex chronology, where different times coexist. Altogether, this paves the way for a visual form of knowledge, which is an absolute forerunner for its time.

The fourth panel deals with episodes from Greek mythology. It happens to contain the first occurrence of an architectural example in the atlas: a bird's eye view of an Italian villa. The plate itself is structured like the facade of that villa. [A] Morphologically, panel 4 consists of four columns and they develop independent themes, respectively. Various subjects reappear in many shapes and forms between one column and the other, linking them together. The first two images on the plate are almost identical. They capture a sarcophagus upon which a sleeping Ariane statue is superposed. The second photograph is cropped towards the bottom, giving a sense of a cinematographic panning down. It excludes the statue, and establishes the sarcophagus as the main protagonist of the upcoming narrative. [B]

Sarcophagi were an important topic for Warburg. They were mobile image vehicles, vessels upon which antique iconography can travel, and later be revived. Incorporated into facades as building materials they were more useful to the spolia than statues or jewelry. As such, Sarcophagi were particularly capable of reaching far beyond their epoch and culture.

On the reliefs coming from various sarcophagi, we witness vivid episodes from Greek mythology. The Gigantomakhía, or Heracles' labours, stage bodies spanned with tension. These expressive representations of the body, transmitting intense emotions, serve as hinges, for Warburg, between antiquity and modernity. The fourth picture shows a faked Roman ceramic from the XIX century. It stages the episode of Deianira's kidnapping by the centaur, thus pursuing Heracles' story. The plate concludes on the abduction of Leucippus' daughters.

The second column is also related to another famous kidnapping, that of Helen of Troy. The pictures focus entirely on the event of Paris' judgment. The scene involves three goddesses and the Trojan prince who has to choose the most charming. It traditionally opens the War of Troy. The episode is also of significance in a short text that Warburg wrote in 1929 about Manet's «Déjeuner sur l'herbe». [C] He compares the posture of the small group in the French painting to an engraving of Raimondi, and ultimately to the three sarcophagi where nymphs and a river god are strikingly depicted in a similar fashion. What is at stake in the text is not simply the identification of a source but the evolution of a motif through time. The last of these sarcophagi was later immured in the facade of the Villa Doria Pamphili.

The building appears atop the third column of the plate, in a bird's eye view of the casino and its garden. Warburg would probably have explained that one can find the statue of a river god directly beneath the sarcophagus. Correspondingly, he placed a reproduction of the Nile god below the Panorama. River gods, reminiscent of the postures in the Manet painting, also appear on photographs of a Roman altar. Upon it, we find illustrations of the Trojan War and the subsequent founding of Rome. Slowly, the topic of Rome, which is prevalent in the upcoming panels, emerges.
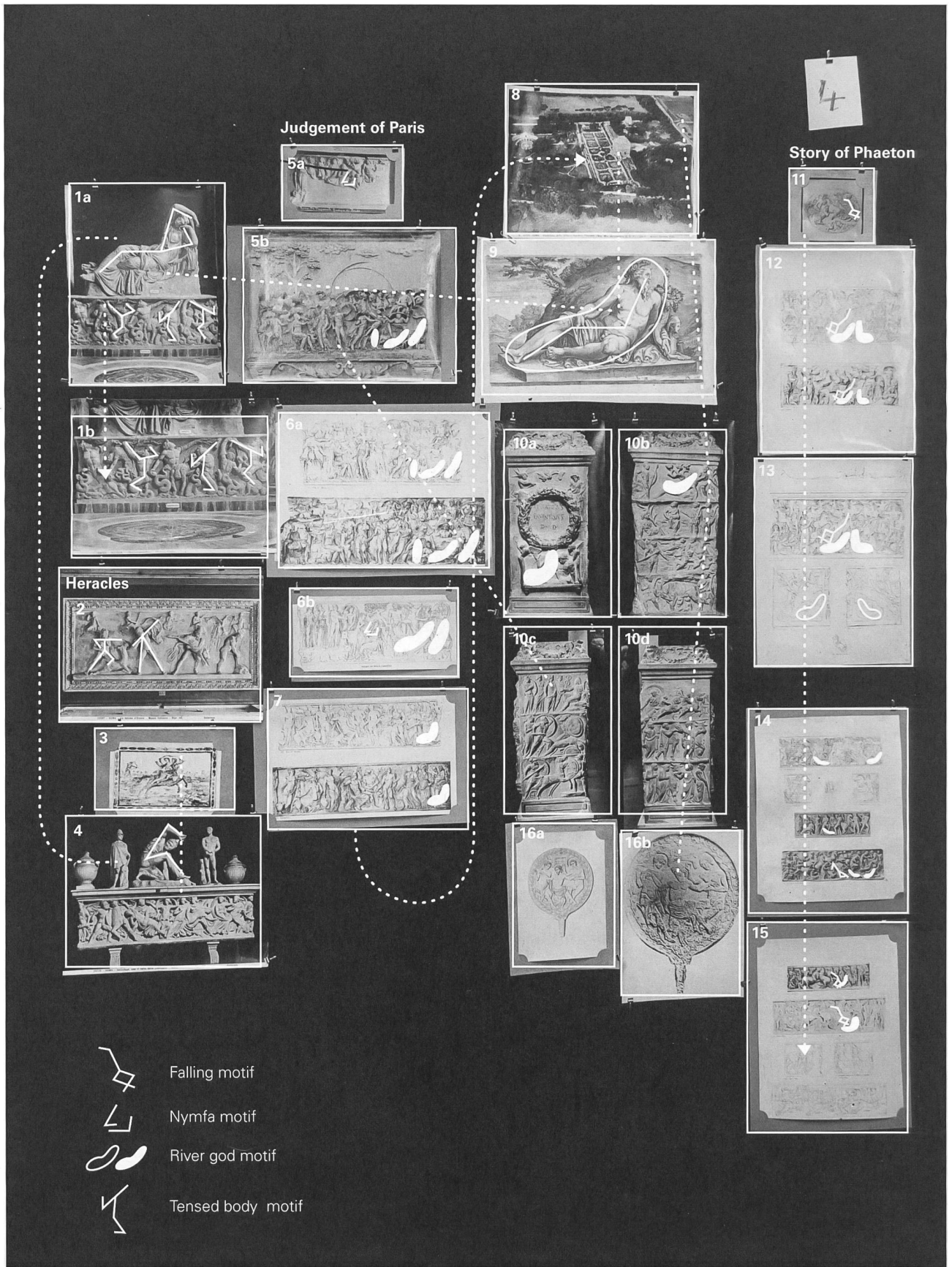
A   Aby Warburg, Mnemosyne Atlas, Hamburg, 1929. Image: Warburg Institute and author
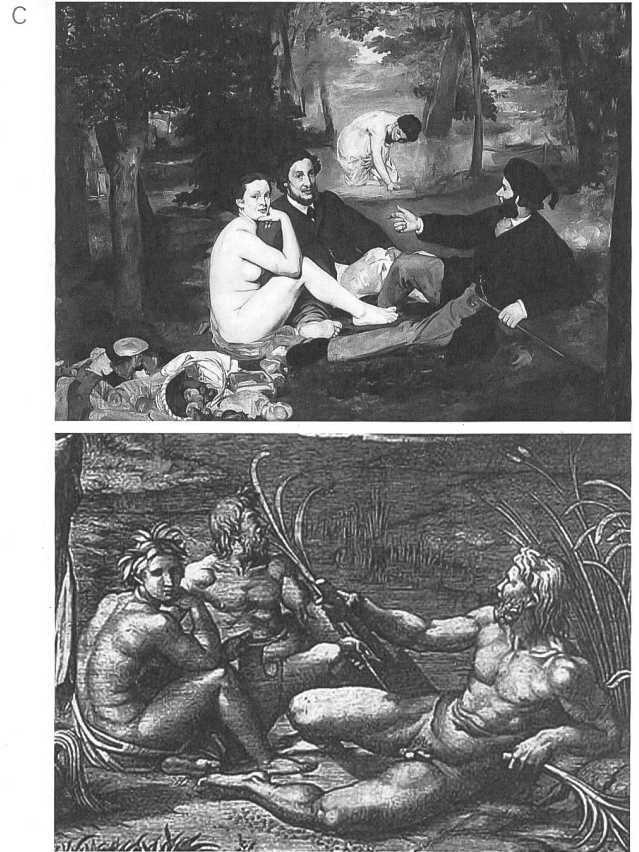
B   Detail plate 4 of the atlas: Arianna dormiente
       & Gigantomachia, Musei Vaticani, Rome, ca.1880.
       Image: Warburg Institute

C   Detail plate 55 of the atlas: Edouard Manet,
       Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, Paris, 1863 & Marcantonio
       Raimondi, Giudizio di Paride, Rome, 1514–1518.
       Image: Wikimedia Commons

D   Alessandro Algardi, Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi, Villa
       Doria Pamphili, Rome, 1644–1652. Image: author

It is interesting here to note that the villa wasn't depicted with a detailed view of the facade and the sarcophagus, but rather from very far away, in its relation to the Roman city. This is characteristic of the treatment of images within the atlas. They are not only to be taken for what they immediately represent, but also as narrative hinges. [D]

The fourth column revolves almost entirely around the story of Phaeton and his fall from Helios' chariot. Once again, through the juxtaposition of several sources, one witnesses similar gestural postures being repeated through time. The episodes close the story of the whole plate with a sort of inversion. The heroism of the first column is contrasted with the drama of a fallen champion, plunging into the sea of river gods. This sort of polarities, very present within Warburg's work, underline the importance of narration in the reading of the atlas. It reveals pathways among the collection of a panel and allows to unlock the knowledge contained within the atlas, literally bringing it to life.

Narratives are intimately tied to the form of the atlas. Every plate, and this is a major aspect of the atlas, has a different pathway, and a different background. Some are more like inventories, others take the form of a map or even of a wall. The images populating these trajectories dialogue together. Recontextualized, they allow for a new interpretation. This new context depends on the spatial relationships between the different works on the plate. Mnemosyne becomes a resemblance, a repetition, a rhythm. The displayed images are not taken for their upfront value but become an argument in the subtext of the plate. The first two photographs or the bird's eye view of the villa are insightful as such. The hierarchy and classification to which these works were traditionally subjected, is suspended. On the black surface of the atlas, they lay on an equivalent reading layer, and can start to discuss with similar values, regardless of their media or historical context. They can be conceived together.

This allows for a layering time and extracts the works from the fiction of a too linear understanding of time. This multiplicity of chronologies begins with the first picture of plate 4. The sarcophagus is older than the Ariane statue laying on top of it, but they seem to belong together. They are read simultaneously, in a state of heterochronia. This appears all over the atlas. The kidnapping of Deianira, on the first column, is illustrated with a faked mosaic of the XIX. It is read in continuity with the Roman relief atop, two millennia older, which depicts the same mythological saga. As the gaze moves over the atlas, it embraces different works and makes them coexist. Time becomes a mobile category expressed through recurrences, reproductions and re-apparitions. This is the genius of Mnemosyne, the unveiling of motifs which re-appear, which are revived throughout the history of art.

This understanding of time as a rhythm, manifested through repetition, is omnipresent in the atlas. Sometimes, as in plates 4 and 40 to 42, the whole structure, or pathway is repeated from one panel to another. It produces a vertiginous impression of «deja vu». Gestures re-appear, as in the example of the Manet painting, but also figures. Perseus, nymphs and river gods, like ghosts, evolve throughout the fabric of the atlas. They belong to various epochs that they unite transversally. The Warburgian idea of «Nachleben» – elements of the visual culture dying out and being brought back to life in another epoch – implies a sense of multilayered time. This conception of time is incarnated by the atlas itself. It is over its surface that the depths of the past are played again and reconfigured. Sources are reread, and retold. Narratives bring the atlas alive.

What the atlas ultimately propels is the counteracting of the post-Newtonian world, where time is reduced to a linear parameter which can be broken down and integrated. It unveils interactions between past and present. It shows manifestations of a past that is reproduced. This is not to be confused with an argument for a circular history, the idea of «Nachleben» itself opposes a periodization of time. It proposes a complication of time, where past has a momentum and is never completely abolished. We are always living, in acceptance or in conflict, with this past. This is nothing new, I am merely paraphrasing Faulkner.

«The past is never dead. It's not even past.» [2]

This essay derives from a conversation with Philipp Schwalb. I am indebted to him for his inexhaustible knowledge about the atlas and taking the time to share it.

Yann Salzmann, born 1994, studied at EPFL and is currently graduating at ETH Zurich. His work evolves between architecture and stage design.

Philipp Schwalb, born 1984, lives in Berlin and NYC as an independent artist, curator and author with an interdisciplinary approach. Since 2010 he has presented at many solo and group exhibitions, and featured on several art historian events and conferences. He initiated and has been active in several research groups and organizations. When he co-organized the 8th Salon in Hamburg he started curating exhibitions and working on a major research project on Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas. From 2017 to 2019 Philipp was a visiting professor at the Haute école d'art et design in Geneva.