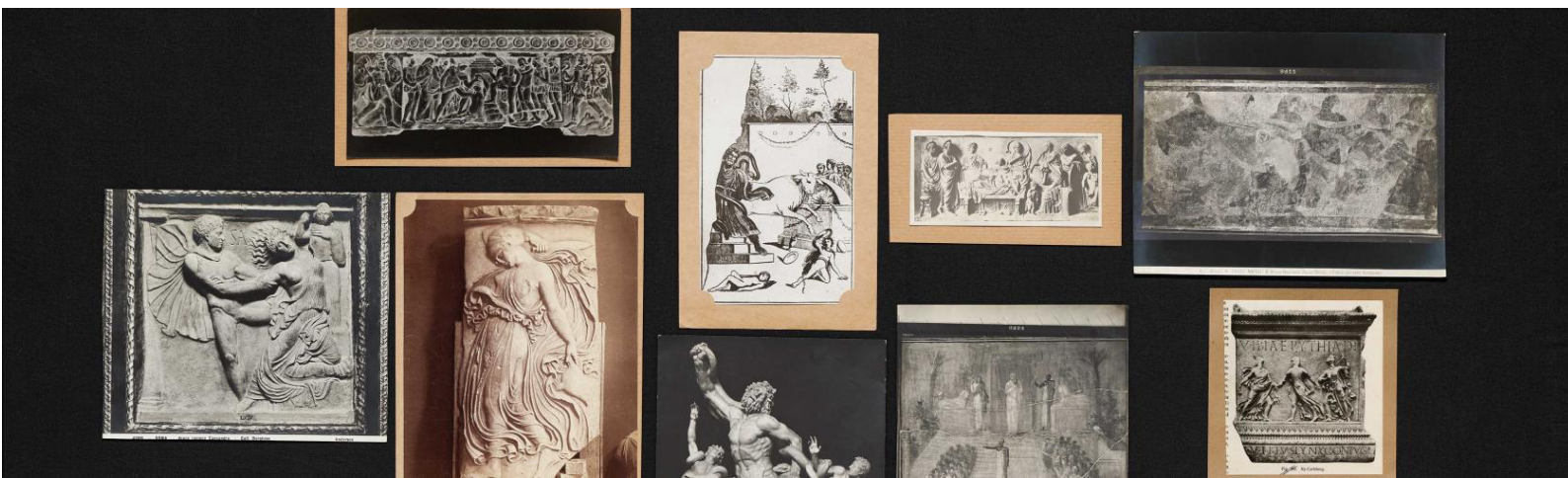


Artist Goshka Macuga on Aby Warburg's Ambivalence toward Technology

'Technological advancement does not assuage our fears'

BY GOSHKA MACUGA IN FEATURES | 19 JUN 20



The modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus, Franklin and the Wright Brothers who invented the dirigible aircraft, are those fateful destroyers of our sense of distance who threaten to lead the world back into chaos. Telegram and telephone are destroying the cosmos. But myths and symbols, in attempting to establish spiritual bonds between man and the outside world, create space for devotion and scope for reason which are destroyed by the instantaneous electrical contact – unless a disciplined humanity re-introduce the impediment of conscience.

– Aby Warburg, 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual' (1923, translated by W.F. Mainland in 1939)

Warburg died suddenly, leaving his last project unfinished: an 'image atlas', arranged on 40 screens, which he titled Mnemosyne, after the Greek goddess of memory. Designed to serve as a storyboard or mnemonic device, it was the culmination of 40 years of his intellectual development and, to this day, remains as enigmatic as it was upon his death in 1929.



Goshka Macuga, *Aby Warburg*, 2014, alu-Dibond, steel core, appliqué and paint, 1.7 × 1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich; photograph: Wilfried Petzi

A subjective sequence, comprising a juxtaposition of images and texts, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* carried a deep symbolic value for Warburg. It underwent continued rearrangements and updates that were sparked by events, such as the signing of the Lateran Treaty by the Vatican and Benito Mussolini in 1929 or Hugo Eckener flying the *Graf Zeppelin* around the world that same year. The latter was especially significant as a testament to science, which typified, for Warburg, man's conquest of the universe. On the one hand, Warburg feared technological progress. On the other, he desired to break away from his old attachments. 'I can no longer stand the sound of my old expressions, stencilled from high-quality tinfoil,' Warburg is quoted as

saying towards the end of his life in art historian Ernst Gombrich's *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (1970).

Almost a century later, Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* could be updated with a long list of new events and images. This ritual of categorization embodies our relationship with history. But the act itself does not grant us the restoration of our conscience (an aim Warburg articulated in his 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual'). Similarly, technological advancement can help us to predict the future, but does not assuage our fears. As Gombrich wrote in his biography of Warburg: 'Art, like science, opposes the chaos of onrushing "phobic" impressions and thus contributes to that sense of detachment which is the essence of civilization.'

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'Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne', curated by Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, is a collaborative project between Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, and the Warburg Institute, London, UK. The accompanying folio volume 'Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas MNEMOSYNE – The Original' is published at Hatje Cantz in April 2020. In autumn 2020 a commentary volume with detailed comments by the curators will also be published. The exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt will also follow at the same time.

Main Image: Aby Warburg, Mnemosyne Atlas, 1924–29, panel 6. All panels have been reconstructed from the Warburg Institute Archive. Courtesy: The Warburg Institute, London; photograph: Wootton/Fluid