Aby Warburg. Art research between art theory and artistic practice

1.1

My objective at this occasion will be to present an introduction of Aby Warburg and his Picture Atlas *Mnemosyne*, and this with the intention of discussing Warburg as an pilot case of an "art research" solidly situated between art theory and art practice.

It will be my hypothesis, that this case may rise some fundamental questions (possibilities as well as problems) concerning the recent trend in art education and art research, with special attention to the current evolution and debate in the Scandinavian countries concerning a doctoral or ph.d.-degree in the Fine Arts (even though those very specific issues will not, more than implicitly, be touched upon).

1.2

In 1975 the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote an essay entitled "Warburg and the Nameless Science", pointing out that Warburg's project was not an "ordinary" art historical project, but, more in line with Beneviste's relation to linguistics, a general project of uniting the different branches of the humanities to one all-encompassing, institutionally transgressing and unified field of
study; in a sense a kind of 'General Cultural Theory' - but not Cultural Studies as we understand it now - and therefore, in lack of name, labelled by Agamben as a Nameless Science.

In an Afterword to this essay, written in 1983, Agamben admitted that this has proven not to be the case; linguistics, as well as art history, has taken other directions. The borders between the disciplines' have since the mid-seventies been strengthened rather than opened.

Nevertheless, I do believe that Agamben has a point in suggesting " a Nameless Science ", but maybe one should not think of this science without a name as an all-encompassing or an inclusive science, but rather as a refinement, a margin or a threshold of our notion, not of science, but of epistemology itself. At least this will be my suggestion in the following -- still insisting on the 'namelessness' of our, in no way all-encompassing cultural science, but rather marginal experiment in epistemology.

2.1

In 1993, an exhibition project, based on Aby Warburg's unfinished " Mnemosyne-Atlas " was opened in Hamburger Planetarium under the title : " Aby Warburg. Bildersammlung zur Geschichte von Sternglaube und Sternkunde im Hamburger Planetarium ". The year after a reconstruction of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne-Atlas was exhibited in
Hamburger Kunsthau, and shortly before, a reconstructed edition of the so-called "Last version" of the Mnemosyne-Atlas was exhibited at the Academy of the Fine Arts in Vienna.

This series of exhibitions, based on the works of an art historian is rather remarkable, as being the only exhibitions where not the artist, but the art historian was responsible for the exhibits.

( Similar tendencies can however be noted almost simultaneously in the case of Walter Benjamin in connection with his unfinished "Arcades Project", and, more recently, with Centre Pompidou's exhibition of Roland Barthes or with the recently opened Kunsthaus Graz' exhibition of Pierre Bourdieus writings and photographs on the consequences of the French colonization of Algeria ) ... I am sure you can mention a dozen similar exhibitions.

2.2

I think this is more than a trend. I believe we are observing a shift in the reception of which kind of objects are 'exhibitable' or which kind of activities are artistically relevant. A shift which was inconceivable before the concept of the installation, or rather, before the "total-installation", as Ilya Kabakov termed it, had been established as an artistic modus operandi.

A certain type of science, or, to be more specific, a certain
type of Cultural Studies, has become an "exhibitable" activity on line with art. Not to be understood so, that science were not before exhibited, which it was, but that this kind of humanities now is exhibited almost (but still not quite) *as were it art,* which means, it should be looked at, received as, and contemplated in a very similar way, as were it actually art.

(The provocative thesis here is, naturally, that it *de facto* has become art; those kinds of exhibitions are no longer to distinguish from art.)

2.3

Warburg himself does not seem to have been altogether unreceptive to this evolution, as he from 1926 onwards worked on plans on arranging an "exhibition in word and images, which should illustrate the appearance of the modern mathematical-cosmological orientation and evolution" (you hear: this could very well be a contemporary artistic 'project', but this was definitively not the case in 1926). His brother, Max Adolf, finally succeeded, after the death of Aby, to organize this exhibition in the entrance hall of the newly constructed Planetarium in Hamburg in April 1930, including, apart from several parts from the unaccomplished Mnemosyne-Atlas, some paintings by Max Adolf himself.
3.1

But let us go back in time, and take a look at the background for Warburg's affinity with the more recent artistic practices.

To make a long history short, and ignoring his early art historical studies, in the very last paragraph of his last 'real' scholarly study, "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten" from 1920, Warburg expresses his scholarly objective as a wish to establish a common 'table' for the history of religion and art history (Arbeitstisch – it is worth to underline Warburg's preferences for physical-architectonical metaphors).

Later, it is to this round table Warburg addresses himself in a "Foreword" to the Mnemosyne-Atlas, which "in its pictorial material foundation attempts to be an inventory of the demonstrable pathos-formulae".

I will not here discuss Warburg's complicated theory of pathos-formulae, nor any other of his more or less idiosyncratic concepts which Warburg attach to his Picture Atlas. Rather I will focus on the "pictorial material" foundation. That is, with what kind of medium Warburg saw his ideas to be transmitted, or, to put it in another way: its genre or style.
3.2

The material with which Warburg worked was black canvases mounted on stretchers, measuring about 175 by 140 cm. Each canvas had a number and a title, with a short explanatory subtitle. On this canvas, pictures were applied, usually photographs, but other types of pictures as well, as stamps, cut-outs from newspapers and the like. These pictures were mounted so that they always could be moved, which Warburg indeed often did: he moved, altered, added and subtracted continually, as if the atlas shouldn't have a final form, but more was conceived as a game board on which one had to move one's bricks. And further one could suggest or suspect, that its 'meaning' evolved from this very moving of bricks ...

He continually had the boards photographed, which means that the boards are documented in several different versions. The so-called "Last version" from 1929, the year of Warburg's death, contains 63 different boards, each containing between 3 and 53 different pictures. Other versions from the very same year contain 65 and 79 boards respectively. None of these boards exist today and most of the pictures used by Warburg are lost as well. We only have the photographs from the boards in their different states.

3.3

In his notes Warburg tries to encircle which title this 'work' (in
whatever form he might have thought of) should have, often in a fascinating bureaucratic and circumlocutory language, as, for instance:


Clear is, however, that the word "Mnemosyne" (remembrance) should have a prominent place, as it had, written over the entrance of his Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, in Hamburg.

3.4

We know that Warburg though of his project as a book, in two volumes
with plates. But it is equally clear that Warburg also conceived of
the Picture Atlas as installed in different locations. On photographs
we see it installed in the library-rotunda in Hamburg, he had a
portable and miniaturised version installed in his hotel room in Rome,
he used them in his lectures, and, as already said, he tried to
arrange a public exhibition in which they should be included in
Hamburg. All of which gives certain reminiscences of the memory
theatres - or 'thinking machines' - of the renaissance, as we know
them from Raymond Lull, over Giulio Camillo to Robert Fludd.

3.5

Even though the Picture Atlas was a planned publication, it is
nevertheless obvious that Warburg thought of his Atlas as more
encompassing and more fundamental than 'just' a publication of two
volumes and plates. As Werner Hofmann has pointed out, one of the
central concepts in Warburg’s plan for a cultural science was to
demonstrate the changes in the visual and formal strata in the human
involvement with the world with the help of the very same visual and
formal mediums. That is to say, to read pictures with pictorial tools,
or, to establish a pictorial syntax with which the functional and
historical durable language of pictures more effectively could be
established as compared to a 'traditional' scientific language.

In this sense, the term "Pictorial Atlas", should be understood
very literal, as an epistemological method and tool on the very same level as we regard texts. That is, with grammar, syntax and termini, establishing a communicable, discussable and verifiable argument, analogous as we expect such an argument to be established with scientific texts.

3.6

In this connection we shouldn't ignore the fact that Warburg, especially after his mental illness, had obvious problems with chaining sentences to each other and formulate his thoughts in a continuous text. His notes and drafts from this time are fascinating documents of this process of a "linguistic burn-down". For instance:

Das Augenhandtier | wird durch Fussfertigkeit | am aneignenden Ergreifen | des Objekts verhindert. (Mnemosyne G [21])

In an other note the utterances of the bodylanguage (Körpersprachliche Äusserungen) is defined as, "the luciferian work with the dynamic orientation of the body in cosmos (humanly and elementary), " and these utterances of the language of the body appears in the fine arts as "a replacement of the divine language of the oracle ").
4.1

The difficulty with formulating in a clear and readable language his hypothesis is differently interpreted by scholars. Agamben interprets it rather pragmatically, as a de facto difficulty (by the way not unknown in psychotic cases); Warburg's closest colleagues, as Fritz Saxl, tried to interpret this use of language as an almost magical language, as Warburg's personal "Begriffsmagi".

And, in a sense, they are both right. It is a well known difficulty for psychotic minds to chain words to sentences and sentences to a discourse; and it is a kind of "Begriffsmagi" as well. But as such, it is very close to the way in which we, according to Warburg, are confronted to images. In a sense Warburg uses language as was its elements or function similar to images; as were texts (built on letters) fundamentally functional identical with images (built on lines and forms). This would under any circumstance explain his use of fragmented phrases, metaphors and endless repetition of the same words in different constellations, as he used pictures on the Picture Atlas' canvases: moving words as were they bricks on a game-board.

Thus, not only should the "Pictorial Atlas" be understood as an epistemological method and tool replacing images with texts, but maybe reforming our very way of understanding cultural forms as well.
including that texts could ( or maybe even should ) be understood in pictorial-formal terms.

4.2

A passage in his last written " Foreword " to the Mnemosyne-Atlas, seem to confirm this view. In this he acknowledges his debt to Hermann Ostoffs studies on the origin of the Indo-European languages, noting especially, that what attracted his attention to Osthoffs study ( Vom Suppletivwesen der indogermanischen Sprachen 1899 ), was the fact that when in comparison and declination the word's stem changed, the signification of a word took a qualitative leap with a strengthening emphasis, and this qualitative changed signification was formally represented with a change in the stem of the word. This does mean, that the pathos formulae - on which search Warburg was - is not only carried through pictorial mediums, but also through language itself. And this language is essentially a formal-metaphysical language.

Its discursive side is not as important as its formal ones, as it is the formal qualities ( e.g. the change of the word's stem or vowels in a strong declination or comparison ), which are the essential message, not the signified ; the " opaqueness " of language, not the transparency, that carries is meaning. Maybe, maybe not, corresponding to McLuhan's " The Medium is the message ".

The question here is not whether Warburg is right or wrong ; the
interesting point is rather that this might have provoked him to take this very radical epistemological step in 'discussing' pictures with a pictorial grammar, or, more provocative, to study images with imaginary means.

4.3

In the art historical discourse, Warburg is usually labelled "the father of iconography". This is, however, more a tribute to his institutional and personal achievements, than a correct characterization of his scholarly work. Iconography (or iconology), as we know it today, took an entirely different course than the one Warburg wished to see.

The problem for art history and art historians to cope with Warburg's approach touches upon the very foundations of our notion of science. Roland Kany stated that his theory forms "an interesting, however, neither verifiable nor falsifiable, presumption". Gombrich developed the reasons for this difficulty more in his Intellectual Biography on Warburg:

In a sense its title Mnemosyne 'Memory', is more fitting even than Warburg intended it to be. It shows the memories of a scholar's life as if they were woven into a dream. To those who can read its mute language and expand its references it has indeed the intensity of a
dream; its affinities are less with works of history than with certain types of poetry, not unknown to the twentieth century, where hosts of historical or literary allusions hide and reveal layers upon layers of private meanings. As we have seen, the gnomic language of the epigrams with which Warburg accompanied his concentrations of images serves to underline this affinity. (E. H. Gombrich, Aby Warburg, pp. 302–303).

4.4

In scientific terms this methodological approach is of course highly dubious, if not to say dangerous. When Royal Society was founded in 1662, inspired by Francis Bacon's Advancement of Learning (Engl. ed. 1640) and Robert Boyle's Sceptical Chymist (1661), it was precisely to replace the "hermetic sciences"; when the hermetic sciences presupposed initiation, secrecy, and a deliberately ambiguous terminology, the new scientific ideal was an open discourse, repeatability of experiments, and an unambiguous terminology. A similar shift had earlier appeared in the "humanities" with the historiographical methods of Machiavelli and Guicciardini. It was of course those ideals which formed the modern Bildungsideal in the universities during the Enlightenment.

Warburg's discourse, in Gombrich terms, is thus a kind of
hermeticism (the uniqueness and personal involvement of experience, the initiatory character, "the mute ... gnomic language ", and the ambiguous terminology); his historiography shows more affinities with the medieval chronicler or poet than with modern historiography ("hosts of historical or literary allusions hide and reveal layers upon layers of private meanings ").

4.5

Two epistemological shifts, as is well known, have questioned this Bildungsideal and this paradigm of scientific discourse. Both emerged during early Modernism. The first could, for instance, be attributed Nietzsche's pragmatic historiography (Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Geschichte für das Leben) and Wittgenstein's language-games, arguing – if not proving – the impossibility of a meta-language, which could constitute a sort of reference language (which of course constitute the scientific discourse's implied claim of the principal transparency of signs).

The second could be said to be the historical avant-garde's underlying claim of a metaphysical or conceptual dimension in the visual arts (e.g. Kandinsky, Malevich, Duchamp or whoever).

(We could here add Einstein's theory of relativity and the subsequent emergence of Quantum Mechanics).

The details of those epistemological shifts could of course be
discussed, but I believe we agree in the general picture. And thus, in this almost criminal abbreviated form, we could state that it is in the combination of those two epistemological shifts, from which the cluster of postmodern theories emerges. But not only postmodern theories, but postmodern works of art as well, for instance (again) the reception of Ilya Kabakov's total-installation in the West.

5.1

Shortly before he wrote his "The Post-Modern Condition" — in his so-called pagan period — Jean-François Lyotard formulated this epistemological shift with regard to theory. The "pagan" point he then explicitly or implicitly made in a number of articles, was that theory, that is 'the humanities', have to give up its claim of saying the truth, its assertion of veracity. And this he meant in a most radical way. Because the claim of speaking the truth in an almost obscene way is amalgamated with theoretical language, the very way of producing theory has to be redefined. Redefined, not abolished: this means that theory still should produce discourse and knowledge.

5.2

But how, we have to ask us, can theory produce discourse and knowledge, without the implicit claim of saying the truth, if this implicit claim is layered in our very use of language? Is not
discourse and knowledge with necessity based on an "obscene" claim of speaking the truth?

Lyotard is not sure (who could he), but he doubts this allegation. And in the end of the article, "On theoretical apathy" (from 1975), Lyotard concludes: "The question of truth is a question of style".

I have mentioned this marginal phase in Lyotard's philosophy, because it is during this "pagan period", Lyotard explicitly refers to literature, experimental film and the visual arts, as the sources for this "pagan" epistemology. That is: theory should learn from the discourse of the arts, which implies, that the arts in fact carry a discourse and knowledge - else theory could not learn from it.

6.1

I believe we all feel that this indeed is the case. The arts do seem to contain discourse and knowledge. The problem, for Warburg, Lyotard and aesthetic judgements in general, is that we have problem defining it. Defining, this will say, naming it. It is still a "nameless science".

And maybe, it has to be a nameless science, as any act of naming it, maybe would be to introduce an implicit claim of saying the truth.
6.2
If we are to characterize the epistemology of this nameless science more closely, that is, to answer the question how are we to discuss, criticise and qualify the propositions raised by art works, my personal view would be that we have to take a closer look at the theory of games.

My suspicion is based on the fact that Warburg's pictures on his boards very well could be viewed as bricks on a gameboard, as characters on an astrological chart. The same could be said of Ilya Kabakov's characters recurring in his albums and in his installations, and the same could be said of Benjamin's quotes in his envelopes which constitute his Arcades Project. They all have in common this concept of a set of rules within which the bricks can be moved, and functioning as signifiers in their moving within a set of rules; that is: a sort of grammar.

6.3
Werner Hofmann, who did a considerable work in provoking the recent reception of Warburg's work, once said in an interview: "My basic nourishment is the Vienna School. Immediately after comes Goethe. [...] Especially amusing is a place in a letter to Schiller, where he writes: Works of art is basically as playing cards. You can play them in this way or in that way."
The question and endeavour for us, interested in an art theory within its practice, is, I think, to closer delineate the grammar of this kind of visual games, without falling in the trap of through the back door introducing any obscene claim of veracity in the discourse of this game.

Jan Bäcklund, march 2004.