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Performing Art History

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Research Narrative - *The Shape, The Scent, the Feel of Things*

“As psycho-historian I tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of Western civilization from its images in an autobiographical reflex.” – Joan Jonas/Aby Warburg

These lines spoken by artist Joan Jonas in the opening of *The Shape, The Scent, the Feel of Things*, reference art historian Aby Warburg’s lecture concerning a trip he took 30 years prior to North America, where he experienced the cultures of Native American’s. This experience and the resulting lecture, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, was given by Warburg as proof of his sanity while in a sanitarium for mental health treatment, and forms the foundation of Jonas’s Performance. I was initially drawn to the work because of my prior knowledge of Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a series of panels he worked on towards the end of his life from 1924 to 1929. These panels presented art historical images arranged in relationship to images pulled from the everyday. This work became both a creative and scholarly jumping off point for my own practice as well as Jonas’s and I’m interested in learning how an artist can take a work like Warburg’s writings and method and transform it into something else, something that expands on the ideas proposed.

In my own studio practice, I have started to use the language and mode of arrangement Warburg initiated with his *Atlas* to create artworks similar in form and content. I was drawn to Warburg’s exploration of an art history based solely on images, detached from a verbal or written language. This idea of exploring the relationships of images made me want to research how Warburg went about this dissection and juxtaposition of images. By using Jonas as a case study I learned about the possibilities of this form while also capitalizing on the possible modes this theory could take on.

Upon starting to research the piece it was interesting to see the way the work was discussed. It seemed as though the performance was always considered in tandem with its predecessor, *Lines in the Sand*. Viewing this work in conjunction with or as an extension of *Lines in the Sand* really made me question the meaning and relevance of this work by Jonas. Why was *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* presented in such a context and how could a narrative like Warburg’s be considered relevant at the time? *Lines in the Sand* carried with it this unspoken socio-political context of post-9/11 New York. *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* left me to think about the way that Warburg conceived of and communicated with images, which after review, seemed to be very similar to Jonas’s own methods of image making and display, using images as sources to employ montage and meaning.

When beginning to research this piece there were some obvious sites to begin with. There was Warburg’s *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, which is a direct citation by Jonas within the work. The performance becomes a literal re-enactment or conjuring of this lecture given in 1923. Around the same time I got access to the video documentation from the Dia: Beacon performance and used it as an entry point to the work. Instead of other written or photographic sources, I preferred to use this moving visual source as a way to get a sense of the pacing, the movement, and the space within the work. In addition to this, Dia’s catalogue for the work contained an insightful and helpful amount of information on the work, with an essay by Lynne Cooke, which served as my theoretical foundation of the work, and an interview between Jonas and musician Jason Moran, who wrote and performed the score of the work. I also read more about *Lines in the Sand* as a way to understand the context that this work would have operated in at the time. Later in the semester, finally watching *Lines in the Sand* for class was an important moment for myself and my understanding of the context of this work, and in retrospect is something I wish I had done sooner. By watching both works I started to understand where these influences came from and how the forms of both spoke to one another. They seemed to both operate in the same stylistic language which is very different from the earlier 1960’s and 70’s work we were studying at the time in class.

As research progressed I noticed that I was very interested in following the Warburg-ian thread of this work. I started to use the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a source to reference and I was particularly interested in creating a method of creating/curating that responded to Warburg’s form. In this case I tried to get a sense of the *Atlas* as a whole, using sources like E. H. Gombrich’s *Intellectual Biography* and Georges Didi-Huberman’s *The Surviving Image*. These resources made me realize the magnitude of this object and forced me to take a step back, I had to approach the *Atlas* in a different way, not from a perspective that aimed to understand the whole, but that went about it as a means to understand the most ‘important elements.’ These elements seemed to be Warburg’s fascination with the ‘Nympha’ figure, the inclusion of the Laocoön, and the eventual inclusion of everyday images towards the end of the *Atlas*. I considered all of these aspects of the *Atlas* but I focused in on the final panels because of their element of experimentation, this aiming to connect the art historical with the everyday. Scholars on these final panels cite this inclusion of the newspapers as signals of the strenuous social and political context of 1920’s Europe. For Warburg, the *Atlas* becomes a way to work through the oncoming societal conflicts on the horizon in Europe.

The final bit of research that has shaped my conception of this work is the original *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* essay and the collection of photographs Warburg produced during his trip. These elements combined and reread in tandem furthered my understanding of not only his article but the performance as a whole. I was interested in the way that Jonas cited these photographs, or at least the ones included in the article, and how this trip is perceived by a viewer of the 21st Century. Warburg’s photograph of the man he termed “Uncle Sam,” has become the keystone to my research and an interesting interpretation of the applications of Warburg’s work. This image, which Warburg took while in San Francisco, has a man with a top hat walking in front of a neo-classical building below a set of power lines. Warburg described the man as, “Uncle Sam in a stovepipe hat, strolling in his pride past a neoclassical rotunda. Above his top hat runs an electric wire. In this copper serpent of Edison’s, he has wrestled lightning from nature. The American of today is no longer afraid of the rattlesnake. He kills it; he does not worship it. It now faces extermination. The lightning imprisoned in wire – captured electricity – has produced a culture with no use for paganism… Telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos” (Warburg). Warburg’s symbolism behind this image and the way he connects it to his understanding of the essay as a whole really clarified my thoughts on the essay and allowed me to conceive of the work in a new way.

I have also included a number of images taken by Warburg that I thought were striking for the strange interaction between the viewer and the viewed. The photographs I included in my archive are the images that I found most disturbing yet revealing of Warburg’s position. The image of Warburg posing with Native Americans, Warburg dawning the headdress of a Native American, and the image of the woman running away from Warburg’s camera were most revealing to me, they seem to tell their own stories. These images signal the strange and unequal power dynamic at play in the work. Jonas in her work is trying to subvert or at least keep from further harming these indigenous groups who suffered at the hands of the country around them. These images made me see Warburg’s lecture in a completely different way, it shifted the lens through which I viewed his depictions of Native rituals and cultural practices.

In shaping my archive I adopted a similar method to Warburg, presenting images and texts as equally important sources for study. While I could see my archive as a sudo-form of Warburg’s panels it was less so about emulating his method, as it was the mode of working that made the most sense for me to organize all of these dispirit elements. In my research process I wanted to see all of these things at the same time, eliminating this element of leafing through a large stack of papers and documents. I wanted the images and texts to work together and support each other, to map out an archive that is interconnected and related. My presentation and organization of items on the panels evolved over time. This shift in presentation and criteria for display changed and advanced over time. Early in the research process I simply put everything up on the boards, eventually as my research outgrew my confines I had to curate the selection to tell a more cohesive and coherent narrative to get at the specifics of this archive.

Though this project is a case study on a single Joan Jonas work I feel that the method I’ve developed will inform any future exploration I do. From this project I have realized that I am a copy-oriented researcher, I like to mark up, reproduce, and mull over my texts and images to gain a greater understanding of what I’m looking at. I’m interested in this idea of using images as sources, that a visual analysis is just as powerful as a textual source. From this project I have had to widen the way I think of writing and research. One of the most telling moments was in class during discussion when we spoke of how to create a research practice. That approaching it like I would my studio practice is just as applicable a mode as any to problem solve and confront potential roadblocks with my research.

Working Outline

Title: Enacting Warburg through *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*

Summary:

Joan Jonas’s performance of *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* responds to a method of research and discovery proposed by art historian Aby Warburg that there is this common visual and image-based literacy established within our culture and that this language of repeated forms is constantly remade over and over again through successive reiterations. Warburg’s method proposes that we are socially brought up to understand and feed into this system consciously or unconsciously. Jonas in her enacting of Warburg’s theory isfurthering this concept and proposing literacy through this repetition of forms. Through the understanding of cultural forms and concepts we can better understand the context of our world and develop a society that is aware of these trends in creation and recreation.

Discussion of developing topic:

In the end panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* Warburg starts to deal with the idea of how this study of repeated forms can speak to the shape and formation of culture. Images are a way to navigate the world and even more so today, images saturate our lives. Classical form permeates into our reading of images and shapes the way we understand and conceive of the world around us. Jonas’s presentation of this work is a case study on how to understand Warburg’s method. Through these successive stages of reiteration, repeating some movements over and over again, Moran’s repetition of sound, and the visual montage created can be see as a way to deal with this complex system of signs.

For this paper I would like to interview Joan Jonas. Though I know she likes to abstain from any overt political messages with her work I feel that Jonas has moved into a realm of work that confronts social and environmental issues and is aware of the commentary she is creating and operating in. She also, from studying Warburg and through her work as a performance artist has to know the power that images can hold. I’m interested in the way that she sees montage as an ongoing aspect of her practice, how images can morph into one another in a way that is maybe different in the context of a 21st Century audience.

In addition to Jonas’s interview I would like to conduct a number of interviews with a variety of New York Times and Associated Press photographers, especially both Burhan Ozbilici and Jonathan Bachman who took the images I cite in my archive as important variants on this Warburg theme. I wonder how they approach images like these and the mythical quality of obtaining one since I imagine these shots could never be prepared for. I want to ask when they know they have ‘the image’ and the characteristics of what they call ‘the definitive shot.’

For this research I would need to explore the realms of photography theory and think about the ways that images can carry power. While I have read a bit of Barthes I don’t know that that’s enough to establish a wide enough basis for these theories. I would need to delve deeper into the thinking surrounding contemporary photo. I would also need to think through what’s different with displaying images next to one another to create meaning compared to creating an image and allowing that to exist as its own entity.

This mode of speaking on photos as artworks and allowing them to stand in for the whole to carry meaning is completely different then Warburg’s original intention of putting unlike things together to create meaning. But I think that the language of photography is flexible and storied enough to use the same language of the original *Atlas* to establish a basis for its transition into photography. Photography is also just a short bound away from the nature of film, so I feel that the still image could hold the weight and analysis that I will speak about with the images from the Teju Cole and Jerry Saltz articles on powerful images.

Select Bibliography (5-10 items): 2 annotated

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An example of a successful breaking down of this system is found in the image of Black Lives Matter protester Ieshia Evans being detained in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. While this image stands out, it is not a singular offspring of this style of depiction. At a time when the Black Lives Matter protest was at its height in response to the death of Alton Sterling this image stands out because we are engrained to understand it. This image, as author Teju Cole suggests, takes on a simplicity and classical form that we can easily digest. As Cole puts it, “She seems almost to be levitating. Opposite her are the cops, clad in black. They are only two … but because of the storm-trooper get-up … the two seem like three or four,” (Cole). There is an air surrounding Evans and the pictorial scene is set up to convey this message of good vs. evil, us vs. them. Cole sees this figuring of Evans as the Nympha that Warburg becomes so fascinated with in his study of repeated forms, that “Images trigger our memory of the history of images,” there is this “immediate legibility,” to her form (Cole).

Saltz, Jerry. “Considering the Ankara Assassination Photos As History Painting.”

This continued study of images also lead me to other explorations of images taking on the proportions of history paintings, or classical forms that we as a society already understand and respond to. In Jerry Saltz’s article, *Considering the Ankara Assassination Photos as History Painting*, Saltz dissects the theatricality and monumentality of the images shot by Burhan Ozbilici at the scene of the assassination of the Russian Ambassador in an art gallery in Ankara, Turkey. As Saltz puts it, “the poses are almost classical, frozen, or rehearsed as if from theater, ballet, painting, or mannequin display… in this image, frozen perpetual motion – an entire scene of action and worldview is caught in an instant” (Saltz). These images captured from this exchange seem almost unreal, posed as if meant for their display on the facade of a building, meant to be simple enough to be read from a distance and canonical enough to create a sort of exchange between viewer and image. Author Gino Querini even asserts in his article, *On the Political use of Images*, that our method of searching and taking in images is this endless progression or scroll of images. Think about the layout of images, an ongoing montage of dispirit images that seem to flow into one another, similar in form to the Google image search page which now shows a multitude of related but seemingly different images, bringing about an understanding of the whole.

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