

Title: The Technical Apparatus of the Warburg Haus: possible returns from oblivion

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Abstract: The article examines the technical apparatus of the Warburg Haus in Hamburg and its relationship to Aby Warburg's art historical methodology. A link is made to an exhibition in 1941 by Saxl and Wittkower entitled *English Art and the Mediterranean* that was published in 1948 and again in 1969 as *British Art and the Mediterranean*. In turn, the manner in which this exhibition and publication was image led, the text serving to annotate the images, links to broadcast media, namely Clark's *Civilisation* and Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, as a strong example of a working practice.

Keywords: Warburg, Mnemosyne Atlas, Kenneth Clark, John Berger, Fritz Saxl, Rudolf Wittkower.

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Mick Finch bio:

Mick Finch's research takes the form of studio practice, writing and pedagogical projects. He exhibits his work regularly and internationally most recently at the Sid Motion Gallery (London 2017), *Engrams*, a one-person show at the Piper Gallery (London 2013). He has published widely on visual art practices and is associate editor of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* and the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* for which in 2015, he co-edited a special edition on Simon Hantai's work. He has written about the technical apparatus of the Warburg Haus. Two articles on the subject were published in a recent edition of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* entitled *Headstone to Hard Drive*. He lived, exhibited and taught for 20 years in France and has written extensively about post war French art. He leads the *Tableau* research project at CSM an outcome of which was the conference *Tableau: Painting Photo Object* at Tate Modern in 2011. He is a member of the French research group *Peinture: un réseau de recherche* funded by the French Ministry of Culture, In 2011 he was an Abbey Fellow in Painting at the British School in Rome and he is a Senior Scholar of the Terra Foundation in Paris. He is a Reader in Visual Art Practice at the University of the Arts, London and the BA Fine Art Course Leader at Central Saint Martins, London.

The Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW) is known in the most part from an image of the reading room taken in the first few years of the

library's existence (Fig. 1). The vantage is toward the entrance, with bookshelves to each side, above which are projectors on a mezzanine. It shows its use as a means to display exhibition panels against the bookcase that seem to be especially designed for this purpose. Such an image highlights the reading room's utility as a library, a space for slide presentations and exhibition. A less reproduced image shows the reading room's other side. A small curtained proscenium has a lectern in front of it. An oblong wooden strip on the floor, running counter to the floorboards, conceals a screen, revealed with the aid of a pulley system (Fig. 2).

The oval ceiling window, with its lights orbiting the ellipse, is more visible in other images taken from the reading room's mezzanine and it's clear the shape of the room echoes the shape of the window. Other documentary images from the 1920s show the roof space above the oval window, housing another window and an elaborate mechanical screening set-up which controls the light in the reading room (Fig. 3). All of this is automated by means of a motorised winch.

The projectors are visible in the most circulated images of the reading room but their identity is difficult to ascertain. Another image (Fig. 4) reveals there are three projectors. The two circular forms at the rear suggest two slide projectors for different format glass slides or for projecting two slides at the same time. The large machine at the front is an overhead projector. Thus the projectors could display transparencies and also hard copy images, most probably from books and prints¹.

An image of the KBW's photographic studio (Fig. 5) indicates that it was housed under the eaves of the building. When the KBW moved to London literally everything was dispatched. This included several medium and large format glass plate cameras and enlargers. Research by Joachim Sprung (Sprung 2011). points to there being an early photo-stat machine in use in the KBW, possibly manufactured by Clark in the USA. Images in the Warburg archive in London seem to be from such a machine. The supposition is that the studio would have been used for copying, resizing and developing images in the darkroom. Other images indicate a dumb waiter system was installed in the house that did not survive the years between 1933 and the renovation (Fig. 6). This was probably the means by which books, documents and photographs were transported between floors. There were more than twenty telephones in the house that served as much as an internal communication system as a link to the outside world. A pneumatic tube system was installed that sent documents around the KBW. Such systems were common in stores and banks from the mid 19th century on. Again, this system has not survived. A large safe, in the downstairs office areas has survived (Fig. 7). This was used to store the many valuable books and documents the KBW possessed.

All of these details² point to the KBW being a highly technically sophisticated structure by 1926 standards. The communication systems point to an administrative apparatus much like that of a bureaucratic complex. With Warburg's family background in mind of course a bank comes to mind. The photographic studio points to a use of reprographic means that goes beyond what a library of that period would normally accommodate. However, the integration of the photo studio into the KBW doesn't mark the beginning of working with such means. Photo-boards were used from at least 1907 for exhibition and display purposes.

The KBW reading room is synonymous with the production of the Mnemosyne Atlas that sources date from 1924, before the construction of the KBW began and continued until Warburg's death in 1929. The KBW's apparatus confirms that a reprographic methodology was fully integrated into the KBW's design and the reading room functioned as a polyvalent space; as a reading room, a lecture theatre, a photographic studio and, most probably a space of the Atlas' montage. The production of the Atlas brings the KBW into focus in a very particular way. What has survived of it are photographs of the seventy-nine panels of the Atlas. The images of each panel were taken in the reading room in exactly the same position. This is established by the books visible to the left and above the panel and the bolt of the reading room's doors visible to its right. The question of how many panels were actually used is interesting. The panels were assembled to be photographed and not to be displayed. There certainly were not seventy-nine panels used but perhaps as few as between one and four. The panels were thus assembled, photographed and then disassembled, ready for the next montage. Panel number seventy-six points to an interesting aspect of the material composition of the panels (Fig. 8).

To the centre right are 2 identical images (a detail of an illustration by Jacobus Villanus) except that one is reversed (Fig. 9). This tiny detail demonstrates that a photograph of a detail of the image had been made and the slide reversed to achieve the second image. Interesting here is that some images are simply photographic prints and others are mounted using corner fixings. All the mounted images are in the Warburg Archive in London, the rest are subsumed into the wider photographic collection. The point here is that the process of assembling the boards involved a complexity in terms of the selection of images and their ultimate materialization.

The photo studio seemed to play a crucial role in this process to the extent that a large part of the 900 or so images used in the Atlas were produced solely for this purpose and were not a part of a standing archive. The mounted images seem to represent this production. Ian Jones, from the Warburg Institute in London, who directs their photographic resources, suggests that the quality of the images produced for the boards was provisional and only served their function as material for a photographed and published document and not as exhibition material. In this way their production is akin to a paste-up publishing

process, where the aspect of montage is far from being one of just image selection but is more a specific image production in terms of sizing, selection of details and, in the case illustrated here, reversing an image. The ultimate destination of these objects is that they are photographed as documentation and not as stand-alone objects.

Recognition of the complexity and the labour involved in producing the panels raises an interesting question about Warburg's specific position within the process. That the process was a methodology, that involved extensive collaboration, is demonstrated by a series of panels produced in the 1940s by Fritz Saxl, probably in collaboration with Rudolf Wittkower, and with Otto Fein's technical assistance. They were made for an exhibition at the Imperial Institute in London where the Warburg Institute was housed at the time, and the focused on the relationship of British Art and Mediterranean culture. The motivation here was certainly linked to the Warburg Institute's German identity as a refugee organization being based in London during the Second World War. The war panels clearly show that the photographic equipment was not just transported to London but also that the working method was deeply embedded in the London-based institute's practices. Saxl and Fein were at the centre of this.

An image from the book *British Art and the Mediterranean* by Saxl and Wittkower (Saxl and Wittkower 1969: 39-40), demonstrates the link between the production of the exhibition boards and the images in the book (Fig. 10). The text structure resembles the succinct introductions Gertrud Bing wrote for the Atlas, where the text is narrated directly via the images through a series of numbered references. It's far from certain if the form of Saxl and Wittkower's book is what the Atlas would have taken if it had been published in Warburg's lifetime but it does give an indication of how montage is at the inception of the book's form and that the images are not secondary, serving simply as illustrations of a continuous text. In many respects the text of this book functions more like a *script* than as an academic essay. The text narrates the images and not vice-versa. However, there is a major difference between the character of the Saxl and Wittkower boards and the Atlas. The Atlas is more speculative, arguably esoteric and not didactic. It does seem to be an object where Warburg's thinking is both at work and represented.

Photographs taken in the Hotel suite where Warburg stayed, when he made his Herziana library lecture in January 1929 in Rome show a large board (Fig. 11). It's very different in form from the earlier exhibition and Atlas boards and it was possibly used to prepare his lecture. Perhaps this demonstrates the role of the photographic image in his thinking beyond simply being a means of presentation but more as a way of constructing themes, motifs and connections; as a means through which to think through ideas and juxtapositions. Here is where perhaps the historical importance of Warburg's method resides, at least

as a way of prefiguring how forms of mediation potentially transform a discipline. The composition of this board seems more systematic than the organisation of individual Atlas panels and different images seem to be integrated into single sheets of photographic paper but, on the left of the panel, not in a form that quite resembles the Atlas. This sense of his methodology being linked to a complex technical apparatus raises more questions about how the Atlas works and how specific lines of thought can be applied to successive technical modalities. In relation to this are another series of curious connections. Kenneth Clark's link to Warburg is well known in that he attended the Herziana library lecture in 1929 (Stonard, 2014: 22). He was also involved in facilitating the *British Art and the Mediterranean* exhibition. It's perhaps stretching things too far to say that Clark was later directly influenced by the Saxl and Wittkover publication, that was still in print when *Civilisation* went into production. However, the sense of an image montage giving rise to a text that is more akin to a script is an important dimension of the wider effect of the Atlas. Stretching this point even further - John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (Ways of Seeing 1972) was a direct riposte to Clark's *Civilisation* (Civilisation 1969). Despite declaring an allegiance with Walter Benjamin in the credits of the TV programme Warburg's influence is somehow present and especially in the *Ways of Seeing* publication (Berger 1972) - perhaps a case of osmosis or engrammatic transmission (Fig. 12)?

These threads point to the Atlas as a precursor of a kind image montage practice that finds its way into broadcast Television by the late 60s and early 70s in the cases of *Civilisation* and *Ways of Seeing*. The technical apparatus at work in the Warburg Haus, although considerable by the standards of the time, are the product of Warburg's considerable means. However, they pale in comparison to the BBC's state sponsored technical apparatus put at the disposal of Clark and Berger for the production of their projects. In comparison the Warburg Haus seems almost like a steam punk fiction even though only 40 years separates them.

Since this paper was given at the Warburg-Haus colloquium in June 2016 the entire archive of *British Art and the Mediterranean* has come to light in the Photographic Collection of the Warburg Institute in London. This is not to say that it was particularly hidden as it is housed in three large filing cabinets but when the material was examined it was clear it had not been disturbed for many years. The filing cabinets not only contained the mounted photographs used in the 1941 exhibition but also material and notes and annotation used in the production of the book. The annotations are often sizing notes made on the reverse side of the photographs that are visible on a light box giving indications of what the size of each image should be. The Warburg Institute keeps samples of its staff's handwriting and the annotations seem to have been made by both Saxl and Wittkover suggesting that the material dates from the first publication of *British Art and the Mediterranean* in 1948. However, a recent conversation

with Michael Bury, who is credited as working on the 1969 reprint of the book, has clarified that the major task for the second edition was finding the images in the general Photographic Collection. Thus the archive seems to have been supplemented in 1968-1969 with material for the second edition, published by the Oxford University Press. It is very timely that the *British Art and the Mediterranean* material has come to light. By the end of June 2016 the UK electorate voted to leave the European Union, to Brexit and the later turn in politics in the USA gives this archive a new relevance. *British Art and the Mediterranean* was a direct consequence of the Nazi's coming to power and the events in 1933 that led Fritz Saxl to uproot the Institute from Hamburg and take it to London. We undoubtedly owe the survival of not only the Institute but also Aby Warburg's thinking to Saxl's foresight. At the heart of Warburg's vision is a focus on the migration of images and their power of transmission (Bilderfahrzeuge means image-transport). It is ironic that the Warburg Institute found itself caught up in a complex process of migration as the key to its survival. Also ironic is that one of the means of this survival would be *British Art and the Mediterranean*, simultaneously inscribing the Institute at the heart of British intellectual and cultural complex and also assuring the persistence of the utilisation of Warburg's technical apparatus that in turn kept his methodology alive. Warburg's Atlas is only intact through the photographs of it, that may have always been its intended final destination. *British Art and the Mediterranean archive* is a corpus of material that shares its DNA with the Atlas and gives a real insight into what an endeavour an image-led work of this kind involved.

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¹ For a discussion about the projectors of the KBW see Thomas Hensel, *The Mediality of Art History: Aby Warburg and Photography*.

² Many details of the history of house are taken from Rachiele, V. (2004) article 'Mnemosyne, tappa Amburgo Appunti per la storia della *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*'.