

Ninfa Atlas

Score from which to create an expanded choreography

Memory Archive, Memory Machine. Aby Warburg, a German art historian and cultural theorist, created *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–1929) as a project to track the migration of images and gestures in Western art and culture. He described his project as an attempt “to point to the function of collective memory as a formative force”¹ by identifying reoccurring image motifs.

Mnemosyne Atlas is an archive consisting of nearly one thousand black and white photographic reproductions of works of art, newspaper clippings, manuscripts, and popular ephemera, from antiquity through medieval times, the Renaissance, and up to the early modern period of his lifetime in the 1920s. The images were arranged thematically on seventy-nine large black panels. As a purely visual montage, the *Atlas* invites an idiosyncratic reading through its constellation of images. Warburg’s proposition was to reveal “the life of images”²—meaning the lasting correlation they create between the past and present.

Pathos. In his research, Warburg developed the notion of the “pathos formula” to refer to a language of passionate gestures. He identified dramatic postures and gestures that he saw as typical and reoccurring in figurative works of art and popular representations. These passionate expressions of the body take shape in the mythic figures from antiquity, in what Warburg refers to as ancient performances, then re-emerge in subsequent centuries because of their effectiveness in rendering emotional intensities.

Ninfa. Warburg named the main protagonists of the *Atlas* embodying his pathos formulas *Ninfa* (Italian for nymph). Warburg’s *Ninfa* tracks the universal affective expression of the figure-in-movement across cultures and ages. The *Ninfa* forges a path through history changing name, gender, and narrative role, constantly re-emerging in various forms assigned to them by the spirit of the times (and male phantasms along the way).

Bodies in (between) Motion. The representation of movement is particular in the case of Warburg’s *Ninfa*. Bodies are caught up in a play of overwhelming forces (wind, flight, emotion). Movement, however, is depicted in its moment of arrest as in a painting or sculpture, expressing a threshold between mobility and immobility. They are “threshold beings.”

The temporal aspect of the nymphal motif places emphasis on the phenomena of transition. The locus of the gesture is derived from the image as a pause, while simultaneously charged with dynamic energy, movement and flow.

Performing the Archive. I created the following score by selecting seventy-two *Ninfa* figures from Warburg’s archive of images, identified across several of the panels of the *Atlas*. The figures are cut out, re-ordered thematically (see index) and pasted on a chroma green backdrop. They act as ciphers from which one can draw and make new meanings.

This score is a prompt to expand and diversify the *Atlas*, to respond to the contemporary context of re-emerging gestures, and to re-assign their transmission. Working from associative relationships to these cut out figures, performers are invited to take possession of them and invest them through their personal experience, research, and movement aesthetic. Performers reflect, modify, contest, and invent gestures as a way to perform and extend the archive.



Panel 39 of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*

¹ Aby Warburg, quoted in E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 270–71.
² Giorgio Agamben, *Nymphs*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2013, p. 21.





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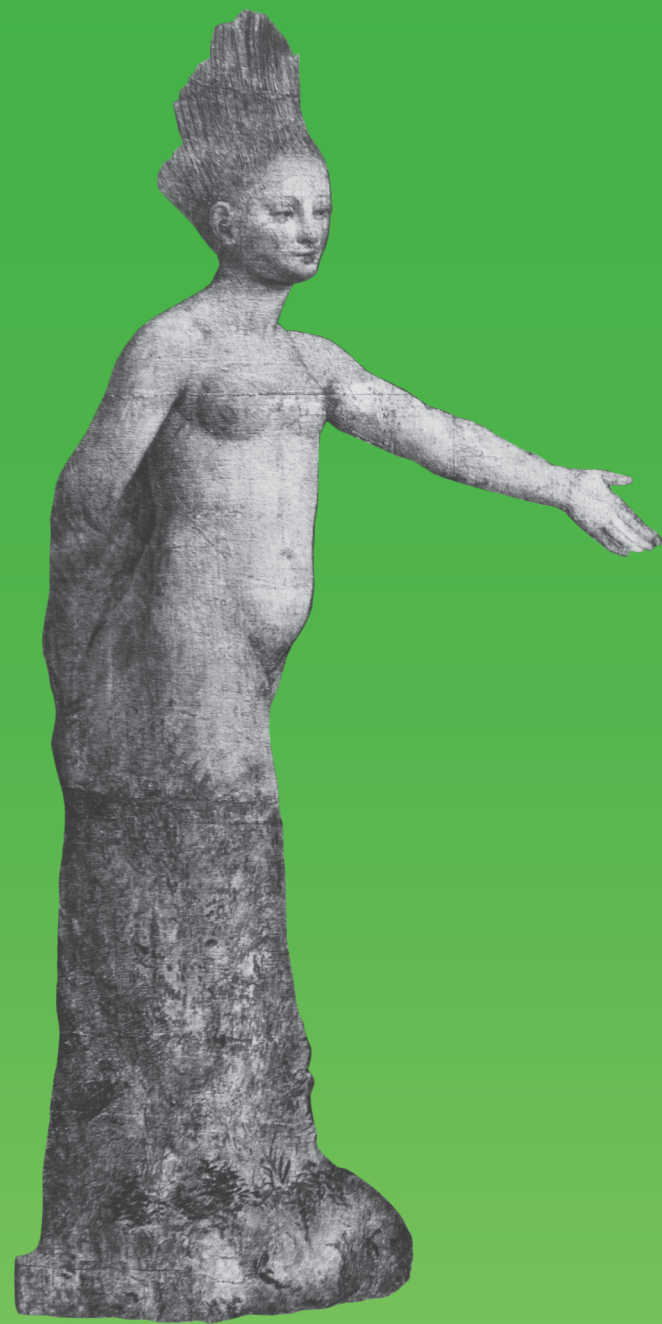
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Ecstatic abandonment

1. *Arianna Sleeping*

statue on a sarcophagus, AD 2nd c., Warburg panel 4 (ancient pre-formations: abandonment and suffering)

Gestures of defense

2. *Daughter of Niobe*

sculpture, Roman copy from Greek original, AD 4th c.–1st c. BC, Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

3. *Daughter of Niobe*

sculpture, Roman copy from Greek original, AD 4th c.–1st c. BC, Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

4. *David with the Head of Goliath*

Andrea del Castagno, painting on leather shield, ca. 1450, Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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Roman bas-relief on a sarcophagus, ca. AD 150, Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

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Giulio Bonason, etching on copper, from a Roman sarcophagus, 16th c., Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

9. *Sieg der Jugend* (Victory of Youth)

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(re-emergence of the ancient in the modern age)

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Nicolò da Bologna, manuscript of the Tragoediae of Seneca, 14th c., Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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15. *History of Medea*

Roman bas-relief on a sarcophagus, ca. AD 150, Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

16. *Jason and Medea*

Giulio Bonason, etching on copper, from a Roman sarcophagus, 16th c., Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

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Neo-attic bas-relief, 2nd c. BC, Warburg panel 6 (ancient pre-formations: sacrifice and ritual dance)

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Filippo Lippi, fresco, ca. 1464, Warburg panel 47 (nymph as guardian angel and as headhunter)

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(ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

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Roman bas-relief on a sarcophagus ca. AD 170-190, Warburg panel 5 (ancient pre-formations: Dionysian pathos of panic, defense and fury)

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28. *Death of Orpheus*

master from Ferrara, etching on copper, ca. 1465, Warburg panel 41 (Re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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Luca Signorelli, painting, 1480–81, Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

30. *Flagellation of Christ*

Luca Signorelli, painting, 1480-81, Warburg panel 41 (Re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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Baldassarre Peruzzi, fresco, 1509–1510, Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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Baldassarre Peruzzi, fresco, 1509–1510, Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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42. *Achilles in Sciro Discovered by Ulysses*

circle of Botticelli, pen drawing of a Roman sarcophagus 15th c., Warburg panel 39 (mythological allegories)

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Sandro Botticelli, painting, ca. 1485–1487, Warburg panel 39 (mythological allegories)

46. *Primavera*

Sandro Botticelli, painting, ca. 1485–1487, Warburg panel 39 (mythological allegories)

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unknown, bronze statuette ca. 1500, Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

63. *Hecate*

unknown, bronze statuette ca. 1500, Warburg panel 41 (re-emergence of the pathos of annihilation)

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Sandro Botticelli, painting ca. 1497–1500, Warburg panel 47 (nymph as guardian angel and as headhunter)

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Donatello, bronze sculpture, ca. 1460, Warburg panel 47 (nymph as guardian angel and as headhunter)

70. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*

Ghirlandaio school, painting, 1489, Warburg panel 47 (nymph as guardian angel and as headhunter)

71. *The Return of Judith to Bethulia*

Sandro Botticelli, painting, part of a diptych, ca. 1470, Warburg panel 47 (nymph as guardian angel and as headhunter)

72. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*

Florentine etching on copper, ca. 1465, Warburg panel 47 (nymph as guardian angel and as headhunter)

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