

Teresa Castro

## Atlas. How to carry the world on one's back?

2012

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2012.1.CAST>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Castro, Teresa: Atlas. How to carry the world on one's back?. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 1 (2012), Nr. 1, S. 193–196. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2012.1.CAST>.

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## Atlas. How to carry the world on one's back?

In recent years the notion of the atlas has become a fashionable concept in both critical theory and contemporary art. Artists such Gerhard Richter and Walid Raad have named two of their most important projects after this ancient publishing genre, while the notion emerged as a means of addressing both the epochal archival impulse and the epistemic revolution brought about by hypermedia. Even though the history of this particular form of visual knowledge goes back many centuries the atlas has come to signify a strikingly modern way of producing, exposing, or thinking about images. The exhibition *Atlas. How to carry the world on one's back?* addresses one fundamental and often overlooked question: what exactly is an atlas and what are its powers? Curated by the French art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman the exhibition has travelled from the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid to the ZKM in Karlsruhe, providing a unique occasion to confront a wealth of artistic and documentary materials. The display is accompanied by an important essay, 'Atlas, or the Anxious Gay Science', which constitutes the third volume of Didi-Huberman's series *The Eye of History*.

Atlases, in particular Aby Warburg's famous *Mnemosyne*, have been a life-long interest for Didi-Huberman. The author's work has been essential in the critical rediscovery and reappraisal of Warburg's enterprise and the *Atlas* exhibition is in many ways a consideration of the epistemic and aesthetic heritage of the latter's exceptional *Bilderatlas*. Comprised (at the time of Warburg's death in 1929) of a collection of roughly 1,000 images displayed and arranged over 79 wooden screens covered with black fabric, *Mnemosyne* is Didi-Huberman's primary object of concern – an entity capable of inventing a paradigmatic structure such as the image atlas, a structure which the author believes capable of renewing our way of understanding images.

Atlases, which were originally a collection of maps assembled in relation to an overall scheme aiming for thoroughness and completeness, became a common designation for a compendia of images at the end of the 18th century; an essential instrument for such different visual sciences as botany, medicine, anthropology, and astronomy. The scientific historians Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have underlined the way atlases played an essential role in the historical development of scientific objectivity, supplying the 'working objects' of science while training and refreshing the expert's eye.

While acknowledging the importance of such a scientific tradition Didi-Huberman goes a step further, suggesting that far from being limited to a simple (albeit useful, systematic, and beautiful) accumulation of images, the atlas as a visual form of knowledge has unique heuristic capacities. The atlas allows us to gather and to combine heterogeneous materials, such as the images that com-

pose Mnemosyne, which range from postcards reproducing reliefs and frescoes to newspaper clippings. Also, as an imaginative assemblage founded on the powers of montage, the atlas is capable of revealing forgotten or unfamiliar visual affinities, ultimately reinventing the world, the order of things, and the order of time. It is this essentially methodological (and creative) definition of the atlas that Didi-Huberman explores in the exhibition: the atlas as ‘montage table’.

As a juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements montage is not limited to the specificity of the filmic medium. Still, many of the works in the exhibition more or less explicitly dialogue with the cinematographic paradigm. Furthermore, the curator/author evokes and discusses a number of films and filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein, Jean-Luc Godard, and Harun Farocki among others.

In terms of display and organisation the exhibition can be thought of as an ‘atlas of atlases’, a succession of plates arranged according to different chapters (‘Knowing through Images’, ‘Reconfiguring the Order of Things’, ‘Reconfiguring the Order of Places’, ‘Reconfiguring the Order of Times’) and sub-chapters. The choice of the book as archetypal expression of the atlas is meaningful. Historically atlases have taken tri-dimensional, architectural forms and even Warburg’s Mnemosyne (which was a publishing project, including two volumes of text meant to comment on the image display) was somewhat inseparable from the library space where it was birthed. To privilege the book is to leave aside the space of the gallery, the garden, the library, and the museum.

Not surprisingly, in the exhibition one finds many of the artists dear to Didi-Huberman: Aby Warburg, but also Francisco Goya with his *Disparates*, *Caprichos*, *Desastres*, or August Sander’s documentary series *Face of Our Time*. These authors and their works are revisited in the optics of the project. Many of them (such as Goya and Sander) reveal both the power and the pathos of images. This is an important point in Didi-Huberman’s argument since the force of the atlas relies precisely in the idea that images, when assembled in a certain manner, offer us the opportunity to reinterpret the world.

The discipline of art history is summoned from the opening of the exhibition. We learn about artists’ and art historians’ ‘personal atlases’: tables, outlines, montages, and charts that allow us to map out new histories. The curator’s purpose is to single out a method taking different forms – those of ‘alphabet primers and pedagogies of the imagination’ (Alighiero e Boetti, John Baldessari, Georges Bataille, Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Höch, El Lissitzky, etc.), of archaeologies of memory responding to Walter Benjamin’s idea of the historian as rag-and-bone man (Christian Boltanski, André Breton, Susan Hiller, Mike Kelley, etc.), or even of natural history and the morphological (ranging from Étienne-Jules Marey’s photographic studies of smoke trails and Karl Blossfeldt’s photographic plates to Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé’s film *Pénélope*).

When the atlas emerges as a montage table it is a sort of mapping device that sometimes explicitly refers to its cartographic ancestry. This is particularly true when atlases address spatial or landscape issues – some divert maps from their conventional use (Arthur and Vitalie Rimbaud, Marcel Broodthaers, Lewis Carroll, Sol Le Witt, etc.) while others reinvent places and landscapes (Josef Albers, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, etc.) or adapt their curious surveying eye to the complex reality of modernity (Walker Evans, Harun Farocki, Moholy-Nagy, etc.). As a visual device they can be both an instrument for exploring subjective geographies (Stanley Brouwn, Guy Debord, Fernand Deligny, Aby Warburg, etc.) or for personal chronologies (Samuel Beckett, Walter Benjamin, Jorge Luis Borges, etc.); but their ability to question the order of things, places, and time becomes particularly evident at moments of upheaval, as if the great chaos of history was written in every atlas horizon.

In the essay that accompanies the exhibition Didi-Huberman insists on the dialectics between *astra* (concepts) and *monstra* (the chaos, or ‘monsters of reason’) at stake in *Mnemosyne*. Warburg’s *Kriegskartothek* (a little-known iconographic collection of images from the First World War, assembled by the art historian between 1914-1918), as well as the photomontages of John Heartfield, Bertolt Brecht’s diaries, or George Grosz’s drawings (among others), attest to the power of the atlas to explore the present and bring to the surface the cruelties and injustices of the world. It is perhaps in these final sections that the potency of *Mnemosyne* as a theoretical object is most evident, the curator evoking Warburg’s idea of a ‘history of ghosts for adults’ – the atlas as a visual device capable of calling up the repressed. The works of Pascal Convert, Gerhard Richter, or Walid Raad illustrate this point while those of Jean-Luc Godard, Harun Farocki, Ernesto de Martino, or even Ulrike Ottinger demonstrate how this return of the repressed sometimes takes the shape of a poetic or anthropological study of gestures (*pathos formulae*, in Warburg’s sense).

George Didi-Huberman’s exhibition is an incredibly rich display, bringing together works and materials with a very different status. In the last section, ‘From Disaster to Desire, for the Beauty of the Gesture’, the artistic photographic montages of Salvador Dali co-exist with Ernesto de Martino’s anthropological photographs, Hans-Peter Feldman’s mage plates, Ulrike Ottinger’s script for the film *Freak Orlando*, and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Origins of the 21st Century*. Such a wealth of materials does not always serve one of the curator’s arguments: the need to distinguish between atlases and other forms of knowledge such as the dictionary, the encyclopaedia, or the archive. With regards to this point the catalogue essay is essential reading. Didi-Huberman points out that as a visual form of knowledge the atlas entertains relations with the encyclopaedia and the archive. However, unlike them, the atlas proceeds by montage, i.e. more or less violent sections and cuts, imposing an argument where the archive renounces one. Atlases therefore tend to

assemble a manageable number of images while archives (and encyclopaedias) are never-ending. As Didi-Huberman writes:

‘(...) The atlas gives us an *Übersicht* in its discontinuities, an exposition of differences, where the archive drowns the differences in a volume that cannot be exposed to sight (...). The atlas offers us panoramic tables where the archive forces us first of all to get lost among the boxes. The atlas shows us the trajectories of survival in the interval of images, whereas the archive as not yet made such intervals in the thickness of its volumes, in piles or in bundles. There would of course be no atlas possible without the archive that precedes it; the atlas offers in this sense the “becoming-sight” and “becoming-knowledge” of the archive.’

The relationship between the atlas and the archive is perhaps the most complex point in Didi-Huberman’s argument. The dialects between them are not always easy to discern, which is the case throughout the exhibition. Questions remain with regards to the historical links between the atlas as a material form of knowledge and the archive as a dominant epistemic paradigm of the 20th century. If the emphasis put on montage and a rethinking about the order of time has the welcomed and significant merit of considerably developing the terms of the discussion, it leaves many atlases without a purpose.

One needs only to confront the author’s thesis referring to Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* (a book about how visual atlases changed science and not about what atlases are) in order to realise that atlases can mean different things and serve various goals. In other words, if Georges Didi-Huberman has made a major and impressive contribution to the history of atlases as a visual form of knowledge, one whose solid and persuasive arguments no one can ignore, such a history is still to be further explored and developed. With the *Atlas* exhibition the major achievement of the author perhaps lies elsewhere – in his convincing plea for us to keep thinking about and with images, to critically question the past and the present.

Teresa Castro (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III)