Exploring the Curatorial as Creative Act
Part I - Hidden Similarities

Edith Doove
Exploring the Curatorial as Creative Act – Part I
Hidden Similarities

Edith Doove
edith.doove@plymouth.ac.uk

Abstract

Curatorial practice is usually related to the organisation of the material, of art works and other objects, connecting it mostly to a managerial role. Shifting the focus to an immaterial in-between, an interval, the seemingly marginal or peripheral become constitutional elements for the curatorial as a creative act. Four, seemingly unconnected, antagonists are brought together in this first reflection on the curatorial act that takes the 2010-2011 Transtechnology Research seminar on Warburg as its starting point: Aby Warburg as an important advocate of the iconology of the interval and as curator avant la lettre, Alfred Jarry’s introducing the idea of paired books, Marcel Duchamp as the inventor of the infrathin or inframince, and Arthur Koestler for his notion of the bisociative act. Warburg’s working method behind his Mnemosyne Atlas (and library) is on the one hand contextualised by bringing it into relation with broader movements of his time such as the trend of the scientific atlas and the collecting of newspaper clippings, whereas on the other hand the linking to more specific insights as Koestler’s library angel, Duchamp’s use of the infrathin and Jarry’s logic of the absurd, tries to define new ways of dealing with the curatorial. In looking for the ‘hidden similarities’ between these four this paper preliminarily tries to outline the territory in which further research into the dynamics behind the curatorial process will take place.

Warburg - On Organisation and the Making of Meaning

The material Aby Warburg used for constructing his Mnemosyne Atlas existed of images coming from both high and low culture, ranging from reproductions of art works to advertisements or images from newspaper articles. Since the end of the 19th century Warburg researched the legacy of antiquity in the imagery of later epochs, from the Renaissance and the Baroque to the early 20th century. At the same time he started collecting books for what would eventually be known as the Warburg Library (http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/home/).

Organising, in a dynamic and ever-changing, creative fashion is at the core of both Warburg’s library and Atlas. As Michaud has suggested Warburg’s constant movements during his organisational working sessions in his library, could be compared with the so-called “danced causalities” Warburg had witnessed at the end of the 19th century while visiting the Hopi and Pueblo Indians, “and the collection of books as a whole was both the objectification of his thought and an allegory of the world and the bodies moving in it” (1998, p. 235). While organising his library, Warburg made use of what he called the ‘law of the good neighbour’. Saxl described this law as “[t]he book of which one knew was in most cases not the book which one needed. The unknown neighbour on the shelf contained the vital information, although from its title one might not have guessed this” (Saxl in Gombrich, 1986 [1970], p. 327). Years later Arthur Koestler would
make a similar observation when he introduced his notion of the “library angel” as frequently experienced meaningful coincidences in which the right book or reference suddenly presents itself at a moment of need (1973, pp. 161ff.).

Warburg also made use of his ‘law of the good neighbour’ in the organisation of the material on the panels of his *Mnemosyne Atlas*. His choice of an atlas as a way to organise and express his research into the legacy of antiquity might seem strange but actually fits in a widespread use of the scientific atlas to objectify knowledge that was especially prolific during the second half of the 19th century, both in relation to its large size and focus on images. As Daston and Gallison point out illustrations are “[…] the *raison d’être* of the atlas. To call atlas images “illustrations” at all is to belie their primacy […]. […] in most atlases from the eighteenth century on, pictures are the alpha and the omega of the genre” (2007, p. 32). Interestingly the term ‘atlas’ while deriving from Gerardus Mercator’s 1595 world map *Atlas, or Cosmographical Meditations on the Fabric of the World*, “[…] spread to astronomical maps by the early eighteenth century” which seems to tie in with Warburg’s interest in astronomy (Daston and Gallison, 2007, pp. 22-23; p. 421 nt 5). And although the size of Warburg’s Atlas might seem unusual as well, this also fits the trend. The big difference is that Warburg tried to objectify material that was highly subjective in its combination, to convey new knowledge.¹

Also in contrast with the average atlas the *Mnemosyne Atlas* was presented on separate panels with its images pinned onto these, rather than in a book. This stresses the ephemeral and fleeting nature of their constitution, which could easily be adjusted at will. The images are not presented in a way that is similar for all panels but that is adjusted according to the subject of each and leaving more or less open space between them accordingly. This leads to Warburg’s interest for “an iconology of intervals” to which he alluded in his journal of 1929 (Gombrich, 1970, p. 253; Michaud, 1998, p. 252). As Michaud states: ‘This iconology is based not on the meaning of the figures – the foundation of interpretation for Warburg’s disciples, beginning with Panofsky – but of the interrelationships between the figures in their complex, autonomous arrangement, which cannot be reduced to discourse” (2004, p. 252). It thus alludes to an immaterial in-between space that constitutes the meaning of the objects on either side. It was the space between the images in Warburg’s Atlas, but also that between the books in his library, alluding to their neighbourliness, “the distance between the images, which tends to invert the parameters of time and space, produces tensions between the objects depicted and, inductively, between the levels of reality from which these objects proceed” (Michaud, p. 253). In his recent catalogue *Atlas* George Didi-Huberman sees a parallel with the ‘nomad science’ of Deleuze and Guattari in their *Mille Plateaux*:

“It is a knowledge that is ‘problematic’ and not ‘axiomatic’, founded on a ‘model of becoming and of heterogeneity that contrasts with the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant” [Didi-Hubermann, 2010, p. 54].
Newspaper Clippings

The way Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* is organised (as in principle a collection of images), makes it tempting to see a connection with the practice of the collage and montage used by Cubists and Dadaists. The connection between Warburg and Dada is however not situated in an actual meeting or interest in each other’s work, but rather in a shared *Zeitgeist* or frame of mind, more or less similar to his choice of the atlas. What seems to connect Warburg with the practice of Berlin Dadaists, such as Georg Grosz, is the widespread use of the newspaper clippings collections in the 1920s. As Anke te Heesen states: “Since the Renaissance, ‘cutting and pasting’ has been part and parcel of an active (philological) relation to a textual tradition” (2008, p. 298). Warburg’s use of *Zettelkästen* to collect newspaper clippings and other materials for his research fitted in fact within a tradition in which “[n]umerous scientists, artists, and writers took part in collecting newspaper articles around 1900” (Heesen, 2008, p. 299). Although te Heesen does not mention Warburg, she gives several examples of other scientists such as Franz Maria Feldhaus, an historian of technology, who, starting in 1904, collected everything available on the history of technology. But also a writer as Alfred Döblin made extensive use of newspaper clippings when writing his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. As te Heesen remarks: “The collages of [Dadaists] Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch would be inconceivable without newspaper and journals cuttings” (2008, p. 299). And [f]or Grosz and Heartfield, clipping newspapers and magazines provided a realistic picture of social and political conditions of the time. Like Tzara in his instructions for making a Dadaist poem, they were convinced that everyone could take a newspaper and scissors and make a collage. Everyone could be an artist because reality and its material fragments are available everywhere and can be assembled as in a factory” (2008, p. 319).

Grosz held a very systematic newspaper collection “with prefabricated and machine-produced elements” (Heesen, 2008, p. 321) from which he could assemble his montages or collages like a mechanic. The scientist Anton Gehrcke at the same time held a large collection solely on Albert Einstein to gather evidence against his theory of relativity. Gehrcke glued his clippings on pieces of scrap paper, possibly in the order in which he obtained them (Heesen, 2008). Sometimes this makes unwillingly for artistic encounters as on a page with several images of the Einsteinturm in Potsdam (see for instance p. 309, fig. 8.2). In fact, one could state that Warburg’s idea of the good neighbour is also at work here.

Warburg himself had been collecting newspaper clippings from the end of the 19th century with a noteworthy period from 1914 when he and his assistants collected anything on the political and military happenings of the time, as Theiss-Abendroth states, in an attempt to “dissipate” the war (2010, pp. 28-29). His *Mnemosyne Atlas* would eventually include reproductions of “art prints; newspaper clippings; leaflets; posters; stamps; photographs of sculptures, reliefs, frescoes, friezes, carpets and figurines; paintings; drawings; genealogical tables; sketches; illuminated manuscripts; and press photos” (http://www.osaarchivum.org/galeria/catalogue/2008/warburg/index.html).
Jarry’s Paired Books

Although Warburg in the first place is an art historian, his working methods clearly resemble an artistic and curatorial approach, so much so that today he’s seen as one of the first (creative) curators. In the press release for his recent exhibition ‘Atlas’, which is based on the work of Warburg and his influence in contemporary art, Didi-Hubermann states: “To make an atlas is to reconfigure space, to redistribute it, in short, to redirect it: to dismantle it where we thought it was continuous; to reunite it where we thought there were boundaries” (http://www.afterall.org/online/atlas-how-to-carry-the-world-on-one-s-back).

This crossing of the boundaries between scientist and artist and reuniting them, is made in a much more conscious way by Alfred Jarry and his ‘Pataphysics or pseudoscience’. In the posthumously published *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (1911) Jarry interestingly introduces the idea of paired books when describing the (ideal) library of Dr. Faustroll that consists of only 27 books, “ranging from canonic symbolic works (Mallarmé, Verlaine, Poe translated by Baudelaire); books by friends of Jarry and big names of the magazines of that period (Rachilde, Gustave Kahn, Léon Bloy), as well as books that could be considered as children’s reading (a story by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Mille et une Nuits, The theater of Florian), or texts that fall outside of any category (works by Rabelais, Gospel of Luke, Chants de Maldoror)” (Schuh, 2008, author’s translation). Schuh stresses the fact that these seemingly unequal books become equal through a shared logic that resides in the individuality of the person that has brought them together and thus forms, through his course or route of reader a unique library (2008). This consequently leads to various chance meetings and possible insights between and into the elements that are in this mix.

Duchamp’s Inframince

Marcel Duchamp flirts in his art production, texts and collaborations, almost continuously with pseudoscience. Although initially just regarded as a minor idea, the concept of the inframince or infrathin can be considered as a tongue-in-cheek scientific idea that essentially lies at the heart of his work. It cannot be clearly defined and only be demonstrated through examples given by Duchamp himself, such as the marriage between smoke and breath when someone smokes. It’s a grey, undefined zone, full of potentiality that can well be brought into relation with Warburg’s Zwischenreich. As Antje Von Graevenitz has recently demonstrated Duchamp in fact evolved several versions of inframince; “the desert-like intermediate zone as interval in the interaction of two states” (2010, p. 216). As von Graevenitz declares: “Duchamp does not define the hybrid notion inframince in any comprehensive and abstract way, but rather in forty-six different notes published only after his death”, in which number 16 defines the infra-mince as an allegory on forgetting (2010, p. 219). Although the numbering of the notes is probably not Duchamp’s work, the first note seems to express a kind of programme according to von Graevenitz, when it states that “Le possible est un infra-mince” (The possible is an infra-mince) (2010, p. 219).
This “desert-like intermediate” zone is continuously fed by Duchamp’s interest in a certain bipolarity and the way this can be negotiated. There is for instance his interest in the relation or opposition between man and woman that he negotiated through his female alter ego Rrose Selavy. This opposition found its clearest output in his love of chess that made him pursue a parallel career as chess master. It even led him to write *L’Opposition et les cases conjugées sont réconciliées* (Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled), also known as corresponding squares, with chess master/theorist Vital Halberstadt which can easily be compared with a mathematical science book. No surprise that Duchamp was influenced by the absurdity of Alfred Jarry’s *pataphysica* that the writer defined in his *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* as “the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments” (1996, p. 22).

**Koestler and the Bisociative Act**

Apart from the earlier mentioned library angel, Arthur Koestler also introduced the concept of the so-called bisociative act which basically “connects previously unconnected matrices of experience; it makes us understand what is to be awake, to be living on several planes at once (to quote T.S. Eliot, somewhat out of context)” (Koestler, 1964, p. 45). According to Koestler the creative act always operates on more than one plane, being “a double-minded, transitory state of unstable equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed” (1964, pp. 35-36). This now not only comes very close to what Duchamp seemed to intend with his inframince or infrathin, but also connects to Jarry’s paired books, Warburg’s good neighbour and obviously Koestler’s own library angel.

**Conclusion**

In his introduction to his book *Cybernetics*, Norbert Wiener in 1948 observed how the boundary regions of science “offer the richest opportunities to the qualified investigator”. Researchers like Jarry, Warburg, Duchamp and Koestler himself all reside exactly in these boundary regions where unexpected connections and observations can be made. (Despite their different backgrounds it is exactly their adventurous and unconventional research that binds them.)

Warburg’s non-linear and non-chronological approach seems almost to be a precursor of the cybernetic approach. In further research, these notions will be investigated further, especially in view of Koestler’s connection between laughter and insight. The above can be seen as an exercise true to his view of the three domains of creativity: humour, discovery and art, in which the logical pattern “consists in the discovery of hidden similarities” (Koestler, 1964, p. 27).

Only two of these men, Warburg and Duchamp, can directly be linked to the curatorial; Warburg for his working method and Duchamp for not only placing the readymade on its isolating pedestal but also through his involvement with and twine installation for the First Papers of Surrealism Exhibition in New York of 1942. It is however the hidden similarities between all four of them that seem to deliver a first glimpse at the dynamics of the curatorial process.
Notes

1 Because of the oversize format of these works, the word “atlas” came in the eighteenth century to designate a very large size [...] of drawing paper. [...] The term was apparently transferred to all illustrated scientific works in the mid-nineteenth century, when figures were printed separately from explanatory texts, in large-format supplements – hence “atlases,” deriving from their size: for example: text volume in octo, accompanying atlas in folio (Daston and Gallison, 2007, p. 421 nt. 5). Without referring to this wider trend of the scientific atlas, according to Gombrich there was even one specific atlas that might have inspired Warburg to develop his idea for a picture atlas. “The ethnologist Adolf Bastian, with whose work Warburg had come into contact in his formative years, had accompanied one of his most theoretical books, Die Welt in ihren Spiegelungen unter dem Wandel des Völkergedankens (‘The World in its Reflections in the Changing Thoughts of the Peoples’), [in 1887] with an ‘ethnological picture-book’ in the form of an ‘atlas’” (Gombrich, 1970, p. 285). Michaud, however, finds the importance that Gombrich grants to Bastian exaggerated (1998, p. 369, nt. 26).

2 The allusion to the possible makes it tempting to connect this statement with the notion of quantum physics or theory, which will be investigated in further research.

Bibliography


