

In 1998, a book with the title *Photographs at the Frontier: Aby Warburg in America 1895–96* was published. It contains photographs of Aby Warburg's journey to the West at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly to the mountain region crossing New Mexico and Arizona. In it, Warburg pictures also the sacred dances and rituals of the Hopi Indians. Warburg had never intended to publish the images made available in the book. Regarding the ones that were part of his famous lecture, the serpent dance, Warburg had even insisted the images should never be published.

In 2009, Stefan Pente and Ines Schaber started to grapple what was a stake with the publication of the images in a glossy hardcover book. In a series of nine projected works they addressed questions that the publication raised for them. In one of them, *Unnamed Series, Part 2: An approach to address something that one would have never dared to say anything about; except through symbolic practices*, they wrote a letter to Aby Warburg in the form of a video, questioning the images and their contemporary use. In it, they tried to change the images—that shouldn't have been taken, nor published—with their own bodies.

In the meanwhile, the Hopis had raised their voice and a communication between their Cultural Preservation Office and the Warburg Institute around the publication of the book became partially public. In it, the Hopis had demanded the publication to be halted, and any redistribution of the images to be stopped. In a conference in Boulder, Colorado—which replaced an exhibition of the photographs due to a broad critique of the images—a broader discussion started about the making-public of the images. For the time being, and until matters are further disentangled, *Unnamed Series 2* will be shown as an audio track, marking the absence of images whose status remains unsolved.

Stefan Pente, Ines Schaber, Unnamed series, 2008.

Dear Jadwa,

Please excuse me for choosing this rather unusual way to get in contact with you. I have tried many ways to find you but so far, I have been unsuccessful. Please excuse me as well for giving you a temporary name. I found two group photographs in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., in the Matson Collection. They were taken in the same hotel hall, with you sitting in the center of a group of women. And although most of the women in front of the camera who are pictured in both images had exchanged their place with other women in between the two shots—you sit there unchanged. It seems that time has stood still for you through your concentration in getting your message across to the apparatus in front of you that you focus at with such intensity.

I can't remember if the image struck me right away or if I came back to it after looking at thousands of other images in other archives. Today, there is still no public Palestinian image archive or an image archive of the region that everybody would be able to use. I had to search in other places, other countries and other archives for the images I felt the need to look for. I can hardly express how strange it sometimes felt to imagine the voyages those photographs chose to take and the stories and histories that emerged from them and their surroundings.

I think your images struck me in relation to all the other images taken and maybe even more in relation to ones that were so obviously never taken. In the Matson Collection your images received the caption "Arab Ladies' Union Meeting at the K. D. Hotel in Jerusalem in 1944," but there is no further information added about what you were actually doing there or discussing. It was also hard to find more information in other places about this meeting of yours. The captions seemed to have given some information about the images in the past, but they are really hard to decipher from my position today. *What were you doing there? What were you discussing and why did you have these photographs made? Did you decide that there should not be any caption or text that would accompany your image anyway?*

As Uncle Bertolt said, "one must have the courage to say that we have nothing to say about faces on photographs unless there is a caption with some sort of non-sense or lies that we can swallow." And as Uncle Edward said, "in themselves photographs are silent; they seem saturated with a kind of inert being that over-weighs anything they express; they invite the embroidery of explanatory words." "What's more," he says "in our heads legends arise unbidden which further obscure the photographs."

But looking at your photographs I am not entirely sure if they do need any caption at all. I am struck by the way you address me. Although you do not really say anything specific. The way you have sent the pictures across time and

space—to an unknown place and receiver, and the way you have set yourself in position, negating foreground and background, controlling every detail for the photographer yourself—I realize that your pictures were not *taken*. What I can see in contrast, is that you have *directed* the taking of your image. It was your decision. You were sending them, and I, among many others I suppose, am addressed by them.

The position you take in the photographs is old and it took me more than one look to decipher why you posing like this struck me. Until today this posture is so often taken that it is hard to tell if it is a convention that one re-enacts or an appropriation of a convention in which one finds a way to act by oneself.

Looking at the images for a while, it became clear to me that you have acted deliberately. It is an acting through which silence speaks. But can we endure this silence through which you are addressing us? Would our captions or any caption be too loud? Are these images not so much about you but about us looking at you? Is it not that something was taken by you, but that you have given something to us? —A thought, a quietly concentrated, collective moment in awareness of its momentary status? A reminder, an address, a manifesto, a refusal, an exclusion, a celebration, a claim, a demand or a souvenir? Which reading should I choose for myself? And will you – the one I am looking for, the one I might never find, never know, and never call by her real name—be able and willing to answer me?

I am left with one last question, the question I have started with: where did you imagine and where would you wish these images to be shown? Did you think that they could help facilitate or provoke a congruence between memory, actuality, and language?

Maybe you can find a way to get in contact with me.

Yours truly

Ines

Ines Schaber, Dear Jadwa, 2009.

Stefan Pente / Ines Schaber
Berlin, Germany

To
Karen Peters
C/o Damon and John
New York

Berlin, May 15th, 2008

Dear Karen,

Please excuse this unusual form to get in contact with you. We would have preferred to meet you in person but considering all of our travel schedules this seems the better way to get in touch with you. Last year, we visited Damon and John at their studio in New York who told us that you had again left to document further historical sites in New Mexico. There, we also happened on a series of your contact sheets that you had left, and eight of them caught our attention. They show the site of the former Palace Hotel in Santa Fe. As far as we know, this first hotel of the town had burned down in the 1930s and from then on, several diverse buildings had been constructed there. The way you photographed them excludes any doubts that you had not known what you were picturing.

For a long time, we have been working on the relation between scientific and symbolic practices; on encounters and passings into unknown territories where one would have to leave one field and cross to another; moments in which our learned tools would no longer function, and where we would have to learn another language. Aby Warburg's work, specifically his lecture on the serpent dance, is important for us in this respect.

While visiting the Hopi area and observing their rituals in search for an understanding of the symbolic gestures of 'primitive' cultures, he had a crucial encounter for his future work in his room at the Palace Hotel. It was in his room that Warburg received Cleo Jurino, the priest of the Chipeo Nanutsch, who made him a drawing explaining the serpent dance. Thus, through the various stories of the encounter, the hotel had crossed our research time and again.

As the story goes, the drawing became an important reference only much later; at the time Warburg prepared his lecture "Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America" in 1923. It was the time and the place, when he was hospitalized in Kreuzlingen, being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. In his own words, he was not able to talk about the experience with the serpent dance in his healthy time. He could only speak about it in a place of displacement. Being accounted healthy later, Warburg called the lecture and his former dealing with the subject the "gruesome convulsion of a decapitated frog," "formless and philologically unfounded," which might have value only

“as a document in the history of symbolic practices.” He made sure that in his lifetime, the lecture and photographs were not published.

We, of course, are extremely interested in this notion of symbolic practices. And we ask ourselves: What is the material, the information package, of which only a little drawing is left? Who was the sender of this material? Who the original recorder? And why are we receiving it? We assume you know the story as the lecture has been around for a while. Some of the photographs of the lecture and other images Warburg made on his travel have only recently been published. Looking at them, we are wondering in which relation one could see these images to his experience and practice of scientific observation; to his understanding, his way of searching, but as well in relation to the massive influence this trip had on his life. Should we consider these photographs snapshots or souvenirs? Scientific observations or tourist capturing, recordings or proofs?

Could we read, not only the lecture, but as well its accompanying images, as part of a symbolic practice? And could we consider your photographs of the site of the former hotel as well as part of a symbolic practice? Do you consider them documents or souvenirs? And is collecting documents part of scientific, and collecting souvenirs part of symbolic practice? Do your photographs point to the absence of an experience, or to the disappearance of the site, the experience was made at? And how is the experience one makes related to a site anyway?

Excuse us for imposing our questions on you at once. The reason why we are writing to you is that we are planning to work on those questions, showing work at an exhibition in Brussels this year. Speaking about it and developing the work, we were wondering if you could be interested in showing your photographs as part or adjoining our installation there. For us, it would be a great expansion of our thoughts in relation to photographic practices and their symbolic gestures. Furthermore, we would have the chance to develop a conversation around those questions in person.

Hoping to hear from you soon.
All the best,

Stefan and Ines

Stefan Pente, Ines Schaber, Unnamed series, 2008.