

Each Person's Museum: Montage and Phantasms

Sheila Cabo Geraldo

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.
sheicg4@gmail.com

Phantasms

Memory prompted me to write this article. More specifically, it was an exercise in recollection that made me go back to two artists who exhibited in the 55th Venice Biennale, in 2013; a memory that triggered reflection on art history as the history of images, implying a history of phantasms organized as montage. The two works that evoked these reflections, reproduced here side by side, are: *Straight*, by Ai Weiwei (Photo 1) and Walter de Maria's *Apollo's Ecstasy* (Photo 2).



Photo 1: Straight. Ai Weiwei, 2008

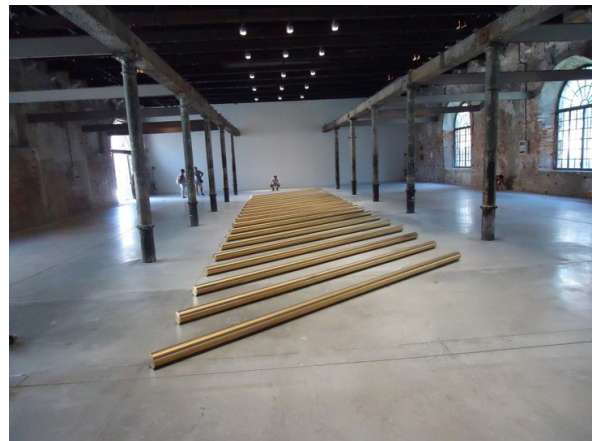


Photo 2: Apollo's Ecstasy, Walter de Maria, 1990

*Straight*¹ was made with rebar rescued from schools destroyed by the 2008 earthquake in the city of Sichuan, China, which killed more than five hundred children. Ai Weiwei pulled out and straightened rebar from the rubble, installing it in an enclosed space in a manner that reflected, formally, the referential work of the artist Walter de Maria - of the 1970s Minimal and Land Art concepts - work exhibited at the Arsenal in Venice. As Massimiliano Gioni, curator of the Biennale wrote in the presentation text:

[...] Walter de Maria celebrates the mute, icy purity of geometry. Like all works of this legendary artist, this abstract sculpture [*Apollo's Ecstasy*] is the result of complex numerological calculations - it has its own system, in which the infinite possibilities of imagination are reduced to an extreme synthesis. (Gioni, 2013, p. 21).

Although it has almost always been associated with Minimalism, Conceptualism and Land Art, Walter de Maria's work cannot be reduced to these categorical definitions. In Chris Wiley's text accompanying the artist's work in the same catalog (Walter de Maria, 2013, p. 74), there is a reference to his long career as a land artist experimenting with large scale projects, but Wiley mainly refers to his works of the 1970s and early '80s, where, in addition to the austere geometric arrangements that characterized the Land Art insertions, allusions appear to non-formal systems, or divinations, such as the *360 I-Ching / 64 Sculptures* of 1981. *Apollo's Ecstasy* was presented in this context, corresponding to the presence of a dichotomy between reason and ecstasy from classical mythology, appearing as inseparable in the work.

Apollo's Ecstasy (1990), which aligns up metal (brass) rods, suggests, by its mute synthesis and as the title indicates, enigmatic contradictions, a particular deviation from Apollinian order, since the bars stretched out on the ground show small - but apparent - misalignments or directional differences, that lead the eye to perceive arrangements of restless disarray that dare to appear as imagistic impurities, challenging visual asceticism. As Didi-Huberman commented, citing Warburg regarding

1 *Straight* was part of the parallel exhibits at the 2013 Venice Biennale, occupying the Zuecca Project Space, Zitelle Complex, in Giudecca. The same work has been exhibited in the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C., in 2008.

the anthropological defense of the image in Ghirlandaio, where anguish at death and faith in resurrection coexist: "What is retained here is the fundamental Nietzschean lesson: art is not 'disinterested' as Kant believed. It does not cure, does not sublimate, it soothes absolutely nothing" (Didi-Huberman, 2013 a, p. 128).

The anthropological defense of images in Warburg is fundamental to his anthropological/cultural history of art, in which images constitute history as symptom and survival - in other words, as temporal eruptions - which Benjamin conceived of as belonging to "*the Present*" - and returns, which Warburg called *Nachleben der Antike* (survival of the ancient). This changes and shifts art history at the beginning of the Twentieth Century,² opening up a historiographical option no longer marked by biomorphic landmarks, but by complex, hybrid strata in which past and present interpenetrate in configurations of becoming. When Warburg published *Dürer e a Antiguidade italiana* (Warburg, 1999, p.553), he begins this 1905 text with an image from Dürer's drawing *The Death of Orpheus*,³ an image representing a tense moment in anticipation of the dismemberment of the hero's classical body by the furious, distorted Maenads. According to Didi-Huberman, this attention to the German painter and engraver was fundamental to contest epistemic models employed in art history from Vasari to Winckelmann, formulated in the natural cyclic model (life-death, greatness-decadence). What Warburg would question before this uncontrolled image of the Maenads - as we would risk asking in front of Walter de Maria's proclaimed turn to ineffable asceticism - is whether there might not be another temporality in the history of images other than that of transmission by successive imitation, employed by historians since the Renaissance and reaffirmed by Winckelmann.

When he explained the concept of *Dynamogramm* - which he understood as a kind of image-symptom graphic - (Didi-Huberman, 2013a, p. 154), Warburg would be dealing, especially, with another temporality; one which presented itself as the survival of *pathos* (*Pathosformel*), manifested in the passionate Hellenic draping, exemplarily restated not only in the Maenads that attacked Orpheus, but also

² Warburg begins to reflect on the history of art in his doctorate when he writes about the Pueblo Indians, then concretizing his experimentation with *Atlas Mnemosyne*. See: Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*.

³ Albert Dürer, *The Death of Orpheus*, 1494, Tinta sobre papel. Hamburg Kunsthalle.

in the terracotta sculptures of Niccolò dell'Arca's *Lamentation of the Dead Christ* (1480). The draped figures in this group of sculptures, as well as Magdalene's stiff gesture, correspond to the return of the ancient Bacchae's unbridled desire. This is something that would have gone unnoticed by Renaissance Italian Christians as analyzed by Vasari, but that reappears, almost as ghosts, phantasms, in Dürer's drawing and in dell'Arca's sculptures.

Warburg thus introduces into art history that which becomes known as the "phantasmagorical model," opening up art history to conflicting and uncertain thoughts, akin to what Freud theorized as symptoms. (Didi-Huberman, 2013a, p. 243). This phantasmagorical in history would coincide with a kind of archival exhumation of documents in which ghostly voices emerged: "inaudible tones, missing voices, voices hidden in the particular graphics of an intimate diary..." (Didi-Huberman, 2013a, p. 36). Given this perspective, images lead the historian to consider a conjuncture of tense processes towards a temporal history replete with disorganized "presents," as Walter Benjamin described it (Benjamin, 2006, p. 503).

Going back to the two works that triggered these reflections, we observe that, similarly to *Apollo's Ecstasy*, Ai Weiwei's *Straight* is visually composed of a cold, mute installation of aligned rebars that remits to a phantasmagorical imagistic expansion, which, in this case, corresponds to the tangles of bars seen in the video accessed in the next room. In this video, screening images of what was left in the rubble of the earthquake, the twisted iron, one perceives the historical density of *Straight*. It is only outside, after one has seen the footage of the earthquake's collapsing damage in the adjacent room, that the full impact of the overlap of images is felt. *Straight* is, like *Apollo's Ecstasy*, about ever so much more than silent geometry.

The Biennale Montage

"The Encyclopedic Palace" was the theme of the 55th Venice Biennale, referring to Maruino Auriti's utopian project of 1955, which was almost an imaginary museum project, or an extensive library (Flaubert), which would contain all the world's knowledge - a cosmology that would reconcile the personal with the universal, the

subjective with the collective, the specific with the general, and where the contradictions, inconsistencies, incoherencies and overlaps of the installations of Ai Weiwei and Walter de Maria would be included.

As in Auriti's project, the Biennale combined contemporary works of art with historical artifacts and found objects. Both the Biennial and the Palace would therefore constitute a huge montage of thoughts with artistic and non-artistic actions. Seen in this light, the presence of both works (AiWeiwei and Walter de Maria) makes us question art history not only in terms of being a register dating back to modern art processes in which formal similarities are imposed as a unifying proposal (history by styles), but also how art history requires the elaboration of procedures capable of taking into account and formulating other perspectives which would annul, through the discourse of form, possibilities of revealing layers of meanings - layers in which one would find submerged similarities but also account for contradictions and resonances.

Thus, in a manner very appropriate to the discussion of the history of the image proposed in this essay, I wish to also emphasize the Biennial's parallel exhibition (*Manet, Ritorno a Venezia*), which could be visited at the Ducal Palace, and where one could see paintings such as *Olympia* (Manet) and *Venus of Urbino* (Titian). The works were curated so that they emphasized the formal similarities between them as well as the influence of the Venetian painters on Manet.

There is no doubt that Manet retained from Titian's *Venus* not only the model's pose, but also the composition of the painting. However, as T.J.Clark (Clark, 2004, p.154), pointed out, contrary to Titian, Manet's painting is characterized by unstable and seemingly inconsequential signs referent to his (Manet's) time, revealing a strong skepticism regarding the ways that similitude had been guaranteed up until then. Douglas Crimp, citing Michael Fried (Crimp, 2005, p.45), also claims that Manet distanced himself from artists who had been hitherto referring to past masters in their paintings, since Manet's disconcertingly obvious copies opened up another debate: an epistemological debate referring to the impossibility, from the 1860s on, of continuing to historicize the origins of each image and of placing them into a chronology of influences and analogies, inasmuch as the very literalness of Manet's copies revealed an acute historical consciousness. Excluding the theoretical timidity of the curatorial discourse, which revealed a certain fascination for

formal similarity, biographically justified by the Venetian influence in Manet - who had spent three seasons in Venice - one could conclude with Crimp that it is historical consciousness that makes us understand just how inevitable it was that, after Manet... "all painting [...] becomes part of the vast surface of painting".⁴

It is on this surface, but especially in its fissures, that the phantasms emerge, a result and propriety of approximations with which the most intensive forms of art and culture resonate.

Understanding art as an immense surface was what led André Malraux to develop his idea of an Imaginary Museum of photographic reproductions soon after the Second World War. Manet's work was prominently featured not only because of the formal similarities between *Olympia* and the *Venus of Urbino*, but also because of the rhetorical proximity of execution by firing squad that puts his painting, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* beside Goya's painting *The Third of May, 1808*.

The Imaginary Museum thus develops a history of similitudes (formal and rhetoric), not one of influences. Photographic representation would have the ability to reduce, as parody, heterogeneity, as Douglas Crimp writes, allowing a diversity of objects, fragments of objects and details to become part of a system of a museum without walls.

Malraux goes on to develop a history of art through these approximations, based on photographic homogeneity, either through materially diverse objects or through temporarily dissimilar images. But, perhaps its main relevance is to be found in the idea of experimental visual montage it proposes, where the historian can take into account, in art, a cultural heritage larger and more expansive than the Western production of the Greco-Roman matrix. The Museum, formed by photographs from various civilizations and cultures, creates, as Malraux wrote, "a Babylonian style" (Malraux, 1953, p. 44), putting forth a way of thinking of art by images, opening art history up to new objects, new territories, to objects not always visible in art museums such as currencies, but, above all, to objects unknown to Western specialists.

Since the 1930s Malraux had been thinking about the central role of reproduction

4 Foucault, M. in Crimp, p. 46.

of images in the construction of our cultural heritage. Based on photographic reproduction and cinema, his essayistic work could point to an opening in the artistic domain (besides changes in art's status), an opening that always extended to the historiography of art. This approximation of images from objects of a diverse materiality and dissimilar temporalities activates what Walter Benjamin theorized as a history through montage (Benjamin, 2006, p.499). Malraux's strategy of montage started from the idea that these images would be published side by side in a book, a way of placing the work in direct dialogue. The book would not only reproduce a succession of images of the same sculpture - with photographic angles taken from the front and back to show the sculpture from two points of view - producing a spatial history to evaluate the sculptural unity, but also include a montage of images from two distinct works.

Didi-Huberman (2013b, p.20) states that Malraux knew Walter Benjamin's writings, especially the text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, from which he developed his photographic Imaginary Museum. He had even received an autographed copy of the work from Benjamin. While recognizing the importance of Eisenstein on Malraux, certainly Didi-Huberman realized that Benjamin's aesthetic and philosophical theories understood just how much the historical vanguards were programmatically producing montages, as artistic and poetic expression reconstructed an uncertain universe from a crumbling tradition. Ernest Bloch (Munster, 1993, p. 68) had identified the concept of montage in Benjamin's historical writings, establishing a direct link between "One Way Street," that Benjamin wrote as part of his *Passagen-Werk* project (*The Arcades Project*) and what he called "thinking Surrealism." Both Breton and Aragon, as Benjamin wrote in 1985 (*Passagens*, p. 91), had seen in the non-contemplative photographic image a potent revolutionary political force⁵ at that moment - as modernity advanced,

5 The presence of photography in the surrealist movement included mundane photos by Bolffard, for *Nadja*, those of Man Ray and Brassai for *L'amour fou*, (both novels by Breton), and Man Ray's photographs for Tzara's *D'un certain automatisme du gout*, published in the magazine *Minotaure*. One can also cite the edition of negatives and the device of multiple exposures, or superimpositions, as well as manipulations with mirrors, which referred to repetition made without recourse to the mechanical world. This gamut of surrealist aesthetics would include the solarized photographs of Man Ray, whose ghostly effect especially seduced poets who identified with "objects-dreams," but also Raul Ubac, who melted photographic emulsion to make his images evoke an oniric effect.

propelled by the storm breaking over the wings of the angel of history, leaving history beneath in a pile of rubble.

The Imaginary Museum of photographs that Malraux began to develop towards the end of the 1940s, still influenced by Benjamin's theories regarding mechanical reproduction in the art of photography (which caused a shift in ways of thinking of art), had, meanwhile, two diverse but complementary meanings for Malraux: It was a museum of images, but also an imaginary museum. The museum of images refers directly to techniques of reproduction, following, as we have seen, Walter Benjamin's concept. It allows people to view all that which is distant in time and space, that which is not transportable or transferrable - everything that even the greatest museums cannot acquire. As Didi-Huberman commented, the Museum opens a photograph album of universal culture, that one can compare to an anthropology of images brought to us by Aby Warburg almost a half-century earlier (Didi-Huberman, 2013b, p. 23).

However, for Malraux the meaning of the Museum goes far beyond the dissemination of knowledge through art images. The museum is also a mental place for the novelist and essayist, an imaginary space without frontiers that lives within us. If the human spirit is capable of retaining the forms it admires, the museum expands. It goes beyond being a repository of imagistic reproductions to be a place where one can mentally conceive of or remember images. It is as if forms, inasmuch as they are magical, can take hold of us, possess us, thus living on in us (Silva, 2002, p. 187).⁶ In this way, each of us would have an Imaginary Museum at our disposal, since every individual would choose the images that live in his or her personal collection, retaining them in memory. In this sense, one can expand the scope of images from Titian's *Venus*, going beyond Manet to include Goya and Hannah Hoch.

It should be clear, then, that the Imaginary Museum is not limited to kinship between forms and rhetoric. Indeed, the constant dialogue between the farthest geographical regions and most diverse styles is what makes the Museum coherent

⁶ SILVA, Edson Rosa da. *O Museu imaginário e a difusão da cultura*. *Semear*. Available through: <http://www.lettas.puc-rio.br/unidades&nucleos/catedra/revista/6Sem_14.html>. Accessed April, 2015.

with what Malraux called “planetary civilization,” where an infinity of relationships would be possible, but no one unique knowledge, such as one can also observe in Auriti’s Encyclopedic Palace.

The confrontation of works described in this history, involving a montage exercise that produces a “non-assimilable pulsation of differences” (Didi-Huberman, 2013b, p. 25) seems, more than ever, required as an approach to contemporary world art. This seems, to me, similar to how Jean Luc Godard’s use of montage in relation to the History(ies) of cinema - which also is a part of my Imaginary Museum - conveys, as with Malraux, a contemporary force to make history. On film, Godard stages a estrangement of the familiar so that one can discover another order, or perception of events, of feelings, that only appears in the intervals or spaces between shots or sequences, appearing as a mystery, as the director himself says (Rancière, 2012, p.70). Godard produces what Agamben (Agamben, 2009, p. 72) called an archeology of the present, one that becomes a meeting place for interpolated times, or moments. According to Jacques Rancière, Godard conciliates two principles by this process: the autonomous life of the image as a singular potency of mute form, opposed to what he terms the “dead letter of the text;” and the combinations of linguistic signs with visual and sonorous elements that “transform the sets of visual fragments into ‘images,’ in other words, into relationships between visibility and meaning (Rancière, 2012, p. 43).

In Rancière’s words:

The cinema that he [Godard] presents us appears as a series of appropriations from the other arts. It comes to us as intertwining words, phrases and texts, metamorphosed paintings, film angles mixed with photos or newsreel tapes, eventually linked together by musical quotes. [...] And in this maze of references, the very notion of the image [...] appears as one that has a metamorphic operability, which traverses the boundaries of the arts and denies the specificity of materials.(Rancière, 2012, p 51).

In this series of videos, we are especially interested in the montage of part 3A, *La Monnaie de l’Absolu*, whose first images already link to Goya’ dark painting, *Saturn Devouring his Son* (1819), and to the whispered text of Victor Hugo in which the writer declares that civilization is among the people, barbarism with the governing. In this one phrase-image, Godard refers - as Rancière would put it - to a history

of the cinema as a history of unexpected encounters and metamorphoses from which the violence of war arises in a phantasmagoric manner where the past and the present are fatally entangled. The phrase-image of Goya's painting and Hugo's text thus becomes potently alive and disruptive. In sum, we can conclude that History(ies) of cinema are truly the history of contemporary power to make history, although to understand this power one has to take the concept of montage into account, as did Malraux. Through montage, Godard makes a world appear from behind another. As Rancière comments, "the power of the phrase-image as it puts together heterogeneous [elements], then, is one of distancing [estrangement] and shock that reveals a world's secret, another world [...] behind the anodyne or glorious appearances." (Rancière, 2012, p. 67). We also see this in the title chosen for part 3A, which refers to *La Monnaie de l'Absolu* – the third book in André Malraux's series *The Psychology of Art*,⁷ which includes *The Imaginary Museum*. If, in Roman mythology, Saturn - Chronos among the Greeks - is he who governs the course of time, guaranteeing its inevitable passage, Godard's historical montage opens up the complexity of history not only in terms of the fatality of violence in the world, but also to Saturn's burden. In other words to the pathos of the contradictions between the desire to control time and the recognition of its ephemerality: a condition of instability that points to transformation.

⁷ Malraux's bibliographic production includes numerous essays and books. Among them: *Dessins de Goya au Musée du Prado*. Geneva: Skira, 1947; *Saturne, Essai sur Goya*. Paris: Gallimard, 1950; *La Psychologie de l'Art*, published in Geneva by Skira (comprising: *Le Musée Imaginaire* [1947], *La Création Artistique* [1948], *La Monnaie de l'Absolu* [1950]), reedited in 1951 by Gallimard with the title *Les Voix du Silence*; another trilogy entitled *Le Musée Imaginaire de la Sculpture Mondiale*, (Gallimard), consisting of the following volumes: *Le Musée Imaginaire de la Sculpture Mondiale* (1952), *Des Bas-reliefs aux Grottes Sacrées* (1954) and *Le Monde Chrétien* (1954). One also should mention the texts found in the trilogy *La Métamorphose des Dieux*, (Gallimard), containing *Le Surnaturel* (1957/77), *L'Irréel* (1974) and *L'Intemporel* (1976). Also important: his text on Picasso, *La Tête d'Obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) and a volume entitled *L'Homme Précaire et la Littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977). See: Silva, E. R. *O Museu Imaginário e a difusão da cultura*.

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