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Kreuzlingen, 1923

We recognize the thing even if we cannot read it, the dog-eared draft of a title page (fig. 1).[1] Typed in *Sperrsatz*, with a space between letters, stands the title: "Travel Recollections from the Region of the Pueblos." A more ambitious subtitle follows, in parentheses: "Fragments toward the Psychology of Primitive Man." Re-reading these typed words, their author clarifies, "the Pueblo *Indians of North America*." Then he changes "primitive man" to "art practices of the primitive," and tries out new formulations: "The survival of primitive humanity in the culture of the Pueblo Indians," with an alternative, the "civilization" of the Pueblo Indians, and below those, "Documents from the culture of primitive man, towards the problem of symbolic relations." "Symbolic relations" adds a new idea, as does a next try, scribbled small: "Evolution and decline of thought-space."

Between "travel recollections" and whatever these are meant by their author now to represent there erupts that huge, sick-making uncertainty with which all writers will be familiar. What is this activity going to be about? When I begin to write, I need some inkling of where I am headed, but that goal comes by way of writing. Beginning in the dark, writing often ends up somewhere else, its goal missed, changed, or forgotten, hence the headache of a proper title. The author of this one tests out the capacious idea that his recollections will be about thought itself, about what he calls "thought-space," whatever that means. His recollections will even be about the "creation" and "destruction" of thought-space, about how thought proceeds thanks to protective walls that thought itself constructs, if only for a moment. Like cities, or like "civilizations" that flourish thanks to fortressed cities (Latin *civitates*), the walls will eventually fail, although not yet. Our author seems to enjoy one of those expansive instants in the writing process when every-

FIG. 1. Aby Warburg, draft title page for *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (1923). The Warburg Institute, London

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thing is, as the line above puts it, "symbolically" related to everything else; when, late at night, perhaps, as the words "opium treatment" written above the typed title affirm, buoyed by psycho-pharmaceuticals, the writer imagines his text to be the answer to everything with a capital "E". The mood suddenly passes. The walls of thought-space are breached, chaos rushes in, and the author pushes his writing away in disgust. "Dusty material," he scribbles later, "drafts that ought never to be printed." "Don't even look at this mess!" he wants to say, even as he has added at the upper part of the sheet, just where a reader will ordinarily begin, a panic cry, "Help!"

Dated (upper left) August 8, 1923, towards the end of the seven-month period indicated by dates found elsewhere in the manuscripts to which the title page belongs, this cry to everyone and to no one resounds from *writing in a state of siege*. The opposite of thought-space, symbolic relations, and survival, it is a primal scream of art historical scholarship. The uncanny thing about this draft title page is that many in my profession have been there both in a general sense, as writers grappling with their material, and in a concrete sense, as persons seated in the very workspace where these panicked thoughts originally took place. For the author of all these typed and handwritten sentences was Aby Warburg, whose great library and archives, smuggled from Germany to England in 1933, form the core of the institute in London that bears its creator's name.

Like countless scholars before me, I did some of my most productive work in that library. And like other users, I didn't only read books and articles gathered there. In the physical arrangements and adjacencies of its material—periodicals in the basement, up through books dealing with "Image" (First Floor), "Word" (Second Floor), "Orientation" (Third Floor), up to "Action" (Fourth), the thought-space of the Warburg Library *used me*, inscribing my writing into a struggle begun a century ago. For as any user of the library will attest, it is by wandering those open stacks, sometimes with a book targeted for retrieval, sometimes just browsing books by subject, that the most surprising thoughts flash suddenly up. Allow me therefore to return to the founder's desk and pick up the sheet of paper he left behind.

At the bottom of the page, Warburg noted that "the delivered lecture is on lined paper and is in a large gray envelope." This lecture was presented to prove its author was sane. Warburg gave his talk on April 21, 1923, before an audience of inmates, doctors, and guests at the sanatorium Bellevue, in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland. The town is named right on the page. Warburg had been confined there since 1921. Prior to that he had languished for three years in psychiatric clinics in Lienau, near his native Hamburg, and Jena. For late in 1918, in the days just following Germany's

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defeat in World War I, Warburg, a fervent German nationalist and a Jew, became convinced that he and his family would be arrested by nameless persecutors and taken to secret prisons to be tortured and murdered, which fate he sought to avoid by actually trying to shoot his family before they fell into enemy hands.

Sometimes Warburg took these enemies to be Bolsheviks bent on murdering capitalists and intellectuals. Sometimes he believed his foes to be preternatural furies conjured by his scholarship and avenging his own lapse from Judaism. Raised in a worldly but Orthodox home, Warburg matriculated in 1886 at the University of Bonn in the then-gentile (and often anti-Semitic) field of the history of art. This choice of subject provoked opposition from his religiously observant parents because they expected a career in the practical professions, and perhaps because attachment to the visual arts ran counter to the Jewish law against images.[2] Within days of arriving in Bonn, Warburg defied his family's wish that he remain kosher: "Since I do not arrange my courses of study according to the quality of ritual restaurants but according to the quality of my teachers," he wrote his father Moritz, "I do not eat ritually."[3] And in 1892, against Moritz's passionate objections, he married a Christian art student, Mary Hertz, and he refused to raise his children as Jews or circumcise his sons. Balking at compromise, he explained that Jewish intellectual culture was not superior to German culture. He did not attend his father's funeral and refused to say Kaddish for him. He referred to himself as a person under a ban, owing to his mixed marriage and non-Jewish children. And when he took his children to his mother's house on Passover, he substituted for the Hebrew Seder songs German nursery rhymes.[4]

Warburg's repudiation of his religion haunted him during his collapse. In the days after Germany's surrender, he pulled a friend into a corner and whispered that once he had declared to a gentile professor, "At the bottom of my soul I am a Christian."[5] After swearing his friend to secrecy about his confession, Warburg screamed the sentence again through the open windows. He wanted the neighbors to hear it. Sometimes in his madness, Warburg believed his pursuers to be Germany's anti-Semites who were now plotting to kill influential Jews. Even as his doctors worked to cure Warburg of these delusions, his younger brother Max Moritz, who had assumed leadership of the great merchant bank M. M. Warburg & Co., was actually targeted for assassination by right-wing terrorists. The policeman guarding him round the clock turned out to be a Nazi spy.[6] On June 24, 1922, these same conspirators murdered Walter Rathenau, Germany's first and last Jewish foreign minister and the Warburgs' close associate.

The Bellevue records of his medical history register Warburg's diagnosis as "Schizophrenia," later put into parentheses and followed by a penciled note, based

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on an alternative opinion of Emil Kraepelin: "manic-depressive mixed condition."[7] He had been violent already at his arrival (he believed he had been brought to prison), and remained dangerous to the end: he attacked his caregivers with "colossal strength" (so the case history records), once almost strangling a nurse.[8] Isolated for his own and others' safety in the clinic's closed wing, he came under the care of Bellevue's distinguished director, Ludwig Binswanger. In 1906 Binswanger had been the first to introduce Freudian psychoanalysis into a clinical setting. Sigmund Freud himself took an interest in Warburg's illness. In a letter of 1921 to Binswanger, Freud enquired about the patient's prognosis, asking whether he would ever work again—he noted that he knew Warburg both because of his prominent family and through "his penetrating work."[9] Binswanger replied that in his view no "resumption of scholarly activities will be possible."

Freud had just published a seminal account of nervous breakdown. Written after Austria and Germany's defeat in World War I, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) responded in part to an epidemic of "shellshock" among soldiers returning from battle. By December 1914, just four months into the war, almost 10 percent of officers and 4 percent of enlisted men in the British Expeditionary Force in Europe had to be sent home because of "nervous and mental shock."[10] Sufferers displayed maladies resembling the effects of damage to the brain, such as debilitating tremors, confusion, and impaired vision, yet no physical injuries could be found. Some medical professionals theorized that the shock caused by machine-gun fire, grenades, and heavy artillery harmed the nervous system invisibly at the cellular or molecular level. Others theorized that sheer cowardice caused these symptoms. "The World War," wrote Franz Kafka in 1916 in an attempt to establish a *Nervenklinik* in Prague, "is a war of nerves, more so than any previous war."[11]

Somatic symptoms with no apparent physical cause intrigued Freud. These obtained in hysteria, the study of which stood at the foundation of psychoanalysis. But symptoms of shellshock contradicted what Freud had taken to be the mind's governing principle of procuring pleasure while avoiding pain. Rather than forgetting distressful experiences, victims compulsively repeated their pain. In their dreams, maladies, and behavior, they experienced shock as perpetually real and new. Theirs were wounds suffered "on the organ of the mind" and produced by a "breach in the shield against stimuli."[12] "Mechanical violence," the shock arising subjectively during mechanized warfare's "storm of steel" (to use Ernst Jünger's metaphor coined in 1920), was so sudden and extreme that no defense sufficed save repetition. The "primitive" defense of last resort, repetition mastered violent stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission caused the trauma.[13]

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Trauma made siege permanent. This conclusion occasioned some of the strangest pages in all of Freud's writings. Forced to venture "beyond the pleasure principle" (in other words, outside the assumption that living creatures seek to live painlessly) he postulated a new, antithetical set of drives: the death instincts, biological urges aimed at bringing the living being back to the inorganic state. In a passage he himself admitted was "far-fetched," Freud reduced organic life to "this little fragment of living substances [...] suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies."[14] Such an organism would be instantly killed "were it not provided with a protective shield against stimuli." Life acquires its first defense by its boundary dying. Living matter becomes a dead barrier resistant to bombarding stimuli: "By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless [...] stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield." Trauma arises when the psyche's protective and receptive walls fail to prevent a hostile intrusion. Freud's earliest model of the human mind, sketched out in 1897, already had the character of a besieged fortress. Inspired—perhaps—by a visit to Nuremberg, where picturesque medieval walls remained intact, he drew a diagram of the "architecture of hysteria" with triangles, like spiky towers, representing neurotic symptoms, and dangerous memories kept out of mind by "psychic outworks" (*Vorbauten*) and "defensive structures" (*Schutzbauten*).[15] Drawn from siegecraft, these terms would have been familiar to anyone living (as Freud did) near Vienna's Ringstrasse, that wide boulevard built on the footprint of the city's ancient walls. On this model, the mind had to defend itself against stimuli both from the outside world and from painful (usually childhood) memories that had penetrated the weak defenses of the developing mind, there to remain unprocessed and restless.

At the time of his psychic siege, Aby Warburg had not yet achieved his legendary status as inventor of modern art history's dominant procedure, the method called "iconology." Iconology decodes images for their messages, which may then themselves be decoded for the cultural attitudes they communicate. The artwork becomes a meaningful symptom of its time. Part I of this book explores an object that has invited and eluded Warburg's influential approach. Although iconology had not been established by 1923, Warburg's work on the afterlife of pagan antiquity in the Christian Renaissance had already paved the way towards a new history of art and earned him an international reputation.

At Binswanger's clinic, Warburg's brilliance and wealth were nothing exceptional. Beautifully situated on Lake Constance and relatively humane, Bellevue was the asylum of choice for Europe's disturbed elite, a place, in the words of the novelist Joseph Roth, where "spoiled wealthy madmen underwent careful and

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cautious treatment, and the attendants were as nurturing as midwives."[16] Inmates included the dancer Nijinsky, the Expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (who suffered a nervous breakdown in World War I), and the feminist Bertha Pappenheim (famous as Freud's first patient, "Anna O."). Warburg delivered his 1923 lecture before an audience remarkably fit to receive it.

Even after the lecture had secured his release, Warburg referred to Bellevue as his "inferno" and termed himself *revenant*—a ghost back from the grave.[17] In April 1923, Fritz Saxl, his academic assistant, wrote that with Warburg's release the "different, more difficult" challenge begins: "permanently living together with him."[18] Clinical records indicate that the patient left Kreuzlingen still haunted by delusions and prone to fits of rage. During his confinement he had been certain that his family was secretly jailed in the clinic awaiting slaughter, that the cries in the hallway were his wife's under torture, that the meat served at supper was his children's flesh, and that Binswanger had been their butcher. Again, delusions mingle with fact and foresight. While at Bellevue, Aby had in fact been joined by his son Max Adolph, whose nervous breakdown (triggered by his father's) was treated by confinement and tepid baths. During these "calming" measures, Max Adolph heard his father's animal screams resounding through the clinic.[19] And with hindsight Aby's fantasies of arrest, transport, imprisonment, torture, and extermination turned out to be terrifyingly prophetic. Members of the Warburg family who did not manage to flee Germany, or who emigrated to Holland, perished in Nazi camps.

Warburg's therapy consisted of bed rest, opium, and analysis. But his was less a talking cure than a working one. It was the labor, performed by writing the 1923 lecture itself, of changing fear into thought. With Saxl's help, Warburg convinced his doctors to pledge his release if he could successfully compose and deliver a scholarly talk on a subject of his choosing. Rather than select an impersonal theme to foster detachment, he chose a topic eerily close to his obsessions: the serpent, primal wellspring of fear, whose threat is inborn in the mind, and whose cult Warburg had encountered among the Pueblo peoples, during an American journey that had helped at once to found and up-end his thought. From a practical perspective, the choice was shrewd, and not only because of the diversion that a slide lecture about travel would offer its captive audience. Reporting to Freud, Binswanger had despaired that, while his logic and memory remained sound, Warburg was distracted by fears and had lost the power "to fix on scholarly themes." By choosing terror as his topic, by writing on his distraction from writing itself, Warburg achieved that attention required for scholarly prose.

And yet Warburg's choice accomplished more than simply productive mania. By his account, the Hopi peoples had themselves turned objects of terror into

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means of control. Through sympathetic magic, they modeled how fear could indeed be transmuted into thought. Specifically, the Hopi, in their rain dances, carried the poison serpent—the rattlesnake—in their mouths. They did this because, in their world view as Warburg imagined it, the snake *was* the lightning that produced storms. Subduing the snake meant mastering rain. The serpent performed the work of culture, which consisted principally in referring amorphous fears to specific causes—whether divine or natural. At once poison and medicine, the serpent exemplified how fear occasioned images and images occasioned thought, and how thought, in its turn, enabled the composure that Warburg and his doctors understood as mental health.

The lecture fascinates because of how Warburg identifies with his theme. He could explain irrational images because he himself had lost his reason. Conversely, these irrational images, explained, could save Warburg, since they were themselves mechanisms of self-control. He makes this doubling explicit by asking, using the medical label applied to him, whether the Pueblo Indians are "schizoid," and what it means to be in a "mixed condition" between fantasy and reason. To the original audience in the sanatorium, many of whom were steeped in contemporary interest in the so-called "primitive" or "savage" mind, the likeness between the snake dance and Warburg's lecture about it must have seemed like sympathetic magic in action. By 1923, many artists, including (as we will see) German Expressionists such as Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Max Beckmann, had appropriated the practices of what they took to be "tribal" art. In this understanding, such art included religious images made by pre-Reformation "Germanic" artists like Matthias Grünewald and Hieronymus Bosch. Warburg, however, was the first *historian* of art to give this impulse scholarly form.

Where the Hopi bit the serpent without themselves being bitten, Warburg spoke his terror without himself sounding afraid. How did Warburg pass his test, when just a few months before he had ended dinner with a visiting colleague by remarking that the meat they had eaten was human? Certainly, the lecture makes sense. By the period's standards a coherent piece of scholarly prose, it evidenced its author's sanity. And where Warburg names his malady ("schizoid"), he distances it as a symptom of civilization's discontents. Yet his argument also depends on a kind of circularity usually avoided in scholarship, because compromising to its objectivity. The facts he reports are also images of his own delusion; scholarly writing resembles the rituals it portrays. Instead of thwarting Warburg's release, though, this mixed condition deflected negative judgment on his condition as such. A decade after declaring his patient "furloughed to normalcy," and five years after Warburg's fatal heart attack in 1929, Binswanger still pondered the

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affinity, observed in his patient, between insanity and scholarship. In a letter to Max Warburg, he mused that a psychiatrist ought to write about Aby's sickness, for "in your brother's case very interesting passages can be indicated between his scholarly views and specific delusions."[20]

Binswanger later theorized the obscure passage connecting writer to writing. Reflecting on Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, in which an architect falls from a tower he designed, Binswanger argued that creativity happens when the mind departs from its ordinary paths. Writers "realize themselves" in their works through an extravagance similar to madness. They leap an abyss between their flesh-and-blood "empirical self" and an "ontological self," the persona constructed by writing.[21] Writing's cause may be a real individual's thoughts and feelings, but writing speaks another voice. Warburg felt the strong impulse of an extravagant subjectivity. In a note jotted down the week before his death, he wrote, "Sometimes it seems to me that, as a psycho-historian, I attempt to derive the schizophrenia of the West from its visual culture as if in an autobiographical reflex: on one hand the ecstatic Nymph, on the other the mourning river-god; manic on the one hand, depressive on the other."[22]

Warburg published no memoirs and revealed his personhood in the guise of scholarship. But he did live an exceptional life, one in which war, ethnicity, nation, colonialism, wealth, reason, and unreason constitute a fable about European identity. Musing on the image he would project to posterity, Warburg boasted, "I'm just cut out for a beautiful story."[23] In his Kreuzlingen lecture, he recounted his youthful westward journey as a tale of civilization told in reverse.[24] Each step forward in his travels among the Pueblo peoples of Arizona and New Mexico seemed to his eyes one step backwards from culture to nature, and from art through masked ritual to blood sacrifice. The tale begins in the village of Acoma in the east, where, in the decoration of pottery and architecture, Warburg discovers the image of the serpent, symbol of lightning and harbinger of life-giving rain. Further west, he visits San Ildefonso and witnesses an antelope dance in which the animal imagery encountered in ornament appears performed in the identification of dancer and mask. At his journey's end, he arrives at Oraibi, in the far west, where he personally observes the seasonal Katsina festivities. In these elaborate rites performed (he believed) to ensure a successful corn crop, Warburg discerns a yet more elemental cultural form: if at San Ildefonso the dancers merge with their masks, at Oraibi they seek magically to influence nature itself.

Warburg did not travel the distance spanned by his lecture. Leaving Oraibi after the dances, he missed the serpent ritual itself and had to rely on photographs—some by the Mennonite missionary, Henry R. Voth, who accompanied

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Warburg part-way on his journey. In this rite where dancers manipulate live animals, Warburg detected a crucial turning point to culture: after their ritual use the serpents are set free. This proved (to him) that blood sacrifice has been sublimated into symbolism, and that animalistic "fetishism" was on the way "to the pure religion of redemption."[25] At this point Warburg returns to Europe in a loop captured in the lecture's motto: "It is an old story: Athens and Oraibi, all cousins."[26] Greek and Jewish serpent cults had originally been sacrificial. Like the more westerly Puebloans, the Christian West transitioned through the snake from sacrifice to symbolism. To bring his point home to his audience, Warburg pointed to an artwork nearby. Ceiling frescoes in Kreuzlingen's parish church featured a scene of *Moses with the Brazen Serpent*, proving that snake symbolism survived just around the corner.

For Warburg this movement is never final, but must be constantly defended. When he visited them, the cultural achievements of the Pueblo peoples were threatened by the encroaching barbarism of modern America, which killed the serpent and imprisons lightning in wire: "It now faces extermination," writes Warburg of the rattlesnake, but also hinting at the genocidal efforts of settler colonialism. Warburg darkly concludes, "Telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos. Mythical and symbolic thinking strive to form spiritual bonds between humanity and the surrounding world, shaping distance into the space required for devotion and reflection: the distance undone by the instantaneous electric connection."[27] The snake dance that he yearned to witness drew hordes of tourists with modern snapshot cameras to northern New Mexico. Warburg purchased a simple Buckeye camera in Santa Fe and photographed extensively during his travels, and intrusively. Although he obtained permission from leaders of the indigenous community to photograph some of the rites he attended, he admitted to sometimes violating his subjects' cultural code, a practice he blithely termed "photography with obstacles."[28] During a break in their dance he grabbed the arm of one of the Katsina and had his picture taken with the unmasked man, knowing full well that "whoever sees a dancer without his mask, will die."[29]

Warburg drew a distinction between "grasping" (*greifen*) as primitive reflex akin to shock and grasping by means of a concept (*Begriff*). And there he was, the putative *Begriffsmensch*, unable to grasp the violence of his incursion. By the 1920s, after a long and divisive struggle, Hopi villages succeeded in prohibiting cameras at their ceremonies.[30] In the decades between Warburg's travels and his lecture, the influx of tourists divided Hopi communities. Some argued that the snake dance projected to outsiders an image of cultural fortitude. Others vehemently resisted the incursion into their way of life, recognizing it as a threat to their

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survival—or their survivance, to use Gerald Vizenor's term.[31] When Warburg visited their communities, the Hopi stood threatened externally by land seizure, missionaries, tourism, and the forced separation of children from their families, and internally by political division. Their state of siege reached back four centuries and continues today.

Warburg never intended the lecture for publication. In a letter attached to the original typescript, he instructed Saxl not to show the piece to anyone without his approval: "This lecture is so formless, and rests on such poor philological foundations, that its only value (and a questionable one it is) lies in bringing together some documents towards a history of symbolic behavior. [...] This gruesome twitching of a decapitated frog should absolutely not find its way to print."[32] Warburg's published work got its energy from obscure documents and artifacts of a specific culture, rather than from speculation about culture in general—"God is in the details," was his scholarly motto. His writing obeyed the rules of academic prose, even if it intimated, in hermetic turns of phrase, a time bomb underneath. By these standards, the serpent lecture lacked "philological foundations." Warburg admits ignorance of the Hopi language and culture. In a page attached to a revised typescript, he scorns Binswanger's praise of the lecture's "findings." The images and words "are the confessions of an incurable schizoid, deposited in the archives of mental healers."[33] A few months earlier Warburg had spotted Hans Prinzhorn's picture-book *Art of the Mentally Ill* in Binswanger's office and flew into a rage.[34] He ranted that the book had been placed there to torment him and was about him. His madness involved the mutually reinforcing fantasies that the world conspired against him and did so by treating him as a pathological case. Warburg meant to turn the tables on his observers. By appearing to define his own "schizoid" condition, he performed, in the lecture that he would come to call "the beginning of [his] Renaissance," a rite of passage from object to subject.[35] To complete this ritual, he himself defined its script retrospectively as case material.

Warburg encountered European art as an outsider, as a non-observant, cosmopolitan Jew exposing the ruptures in Christian religious art, as when in Ghirlandaio's *Birth of John the Baptist* a beautiful woman in a windblown, diaphanous garb rushes into a static scene of Christian domestic life, like a character from a different movie (fig. 2).[36] Warburg called the rushing maiden Nympha and obsessed about her all his life.[37] "I lost my reason," he remembers of first glimpsing her in Florence's Santa Maria Novella. The "embodiment of movement," she was "unpleasant to her lover." "Who is she?" her image asks, and "Where does she come from?"[38] Warburg traced her lineage back to the frenzied serpent-bearing attendants of Dionysus. Mobile and erotic, Nympha breached more than merely bourgeois decorum and

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FIG. 2. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Birth of John the Baptist*, c. 1490, fresco, Santa Maria Novella, Tornabuoni Chapel, Florence. Photo c. 1907, detail from Panel 46 of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, last version of October 1929, Warburg Library, Hamburg

the consistency of Ghirlandaio's style. Her presence a clash of cultures, pagan versus Christian, she violated the harmony and balance believed, in Warburg's day, to be constitutive of art. He made his trip to America partly out of "an honest disgust of aestheticizing art history."[39] Against an inherited aesthetics of the closed and stable whole, Warburg located art's deeper powers in restless contradiction. Images like Nympha besieged the viewer, but fictively, giving space to thought: "You live yet you do me no harm."[40]

In his serpent lecture, Warburg imagined an insider's perspective on the history of art. In the "contaminated" and "schizoid" state of the Puebloans, Warburg thought he recognized his own identity. His motto (coined in Italian) expresses this openly: "Born in Hamburg, Hebrew by blood, in soul a Florentine."[41] In a map he sketched of his personal geography, he put one point at Oraibi, adding another star to his imaginary constellation. His travel documents introduce him as a "German scientist" and "man of means."[42] And in a note penned at Bellevue he remembers wanting to "escape to the natural object and to science."[43] Arriving in New York to attend the 1895 society wedding of his brother Paul, he sickened of the "emptiness of civilization." Inspired by ethnographers at the Smithsonian he decided to visit the Puebloans of the Southwest. Other notes from Bellevue make his motives less detached: redress for his army failure; a need to be manly

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after abandoning his wife and children to a cholera epidemic; a "will to the Romantic." And his goal evoked mixed memories. When he was seven, his mother fell gravely ill. Oppressed by the Hebrew prayers at her sickbed, and disgusted by "an inferior Jewish-Austrian student, who was supposed to be a tutor," he snuck off to eat pork sausages and "consume" tales about American Indians, delectable for their "romantic cruelty."[44]

Warburg did not cross the Pueblo people's path perpendicularly, as us against them, for he did not belong to the missionizing Catholics, Mormons, and Mennonites who accompanied him. When he observes how the Puebloans "are not easily led inside the church," his irony recalls that in Germany he too was not easily thus led. Refusing once to attend a church wedding, he remarked, "It's better that people wonder why we're not there than why we're there."[45] He may have been born in Hamburg and felt Florentine in his soul, but non-Jewish Europeans would deem him Hebrew no matter what. During World War I, in the years leading to his madness, Warburg began to gather and collate all information about the war that came his way. From newspapers, books, letters, and postcards, he endeavored to establish, through the weapons of scholarship, who started the great conflict. Warburg called this labor *Verzettelung*, playing on the German word *Zettel* ("note card") and *verzetteln* ("to fritter away"). Enlisting his wife and children in this manic labor, he assembled some twenty-five thousand excerpts of wartime news, filling his library with clippings and notes. With the approach of Germany's defeat, he came to believe that he was himself the war's hidden cause. He fancied his scholarship on Nympha had reawakened the ancient pagan demons, who now plunged Europe into chaos. This is the historian's ultimate madness: to be the cause, rather than the diagnostician, of history. Even the material residue of Warburg's research came to resemble the thing it purported to investigate. A family friend reported that Warburg's library looked like a "battlefield" with Aby as the grim commander.[46] When the war ended in November 1918, watching the demons swarm around him, Warburg turned (in his mind) into a werewolf and tried to murder his family with a pistol—hence his five-year confinement.

It would be wrong to attribute Warburg's breakdown to scholarship too vigorously pursued. Whilst finding symbolic relations among the bits of wartime news engendered a paranoid logic, it was also this labor that cured him. In Kreuzlingen, he began to arrange photographs in suggestive groups. These he pinned to big panels, each almost two meters wide (fig. 3).[47] From such montages the serpent lecture was born. Returned to Hamburg, he used large bulletin boards to create a constellation of image-constellations—he made some seventy-seven of them—which he would number, photograph, and file away to be combined with other

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FIG. 3. Panel 46 of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, last version of October 1929, Warburg Library, Hamburg

image-constellations. Symbolic relations among images remain open-ended, like the collages of Surrealist and Dada artists of this period, or like Walter Benjamin's "thought-images" (*Denkbilder*) which flash forth "in a moment of danger." Warburg intended his arrangements to be published in a vast picture-book of culture titled *Mnemosyne*, Greek for "memory." He had other titles, too, such as "On the Surviving Patterning-Power of Antique Expressive Values in the European Spiritual Economy," "Image-Atlas towards the Critique of Unreason," and "Ghost-Stories for True Grown-Ups." One draft proposed this gargantuan heading:

> Unity of Imaginative Finding of Causes (Orientation) Traced on (through) the between (through) (from) iconic and (to) sign-like (cyclically) back-and-forth commuting polar (symbolic form of the) function of antiquizing expressions in the form-world of the European Renaissance ... 2 September 1928, Heilwigstrasse 116, on the edge of the bed at 4:45 a.m. ... imagistically pregnant descriptive form and symbolic, futuristic determination/relation ... Where is Bing? Want to speak to Einstein.

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This is scholarship in panic mode, swelling until it collapses. Warburg called himself "a seismograph" of the European soul. His writing registers a sort of earthquake, a modern breaking point where, as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it in his *Tractatus* of 1921, speech must give way to silence. Warburg's image-atlas represents scholarship freed from writing. It imagines art history's holy grail of arguments based solely on the evidence of images.

After Warburg's death, Saxl planned to publish the atlas, but got bogged down and in 1936 enlisted the young Ernst Gombrich to finish the work. Of a different temperament and generation from Warburg, Gombrich had witnessed art history under Hitler descend into an irrational and racialist discipline. He declared the project to be incompletable and filed the material away. In 1982, on a bench in the gardens of Clare College, while finishing the English Tripos at Cambridge, I devoured Gombrich's description of *Mnemosyne*. It seemed to me—the thought is now commonplace—that Warburg's collages were analogous in scope, method, and incompletion to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which had just appeared in its first German edition. That summer J. B. Trapp allowed me to shuffle through Warburg's old photos, index cards, and draft manuscript notes with the intention of writing a doctoral dissertation comparing Warburg to Benjamin. That is when I first came upon the title page discussed above. But writing on the inability to write seemed dodgy, so I changed fields and moved to Berkeley, there to dissertate on German Renaissance art. Three years into the Ph.D. I returned to the Warburg Institute as reader, not as a diagnostician, and I have used the library many times since. In 2016 I had the honor of delivering the Gombrich Lectures at the Warburg. Those talks form the basis of the present book.

It chanced that I finished *Art in a State of Siege* in April 2023, exactly one century after Warburg's Kreuzlingen talk. In the course of my work other relevant centennials came and went: the fifth centenary of Bosch's death, also the fifth of the Reformation, and the first centenary of World War I. Dates organize this book, not in chronological order, but to capture the synchronicities, ruptures, flashbacks, and predictions that—I hope—tell the story of volatile objects that managed to endure. The dates of sieges punctuate history jaggedly. The attack by an enemy acting on their initiative, they violently interrupt the smooth unfolding of ordinary collective life, often changing it forever. The siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (3830 by the Hebrew calendar) remains a singular wound in Jewish memory, but scores of other sieges scatter the city's history, some when the walls stood strong, others when they fell, and death and ruin followed. When civilizations have their origin and center in cities, which require walls to protect them and allow them to endure (in Chinese the words for city and wall are the

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same), then the dates of incursions resisted or suffered will organize time into irregular singularities: Constantinople in 1204 and 1453, Vienna in 1529 and 1683, Magdeburg in 1631, Turin in 1640 (a rare "triple siege" when one army surrounded another, which surrounded a third that was laying siege to the city). Vienna, originally (when it was Vindobona) the eastern outpost of the Roman Empire against the "barbarian" invasions, confirmed its identity as Europe's fortress city, Christian bulwark against the Moslem infidel, in twice withstanding the Ottoman armies, then becoming, after 1683, the bastion of Catholic rule against Protestantism, revolution, and industrialization. When Emperor Franz Joseph finally removed the medieval walls and glacis of his imperial capital and allowed them to be turned into wide modern boulevard, he meant the new Ring Street (built with military arsenals at regular turns of its path) still to function as barrier against rebellious workers from the suburbs. And when Hitler, once a resident in the city and steeped in its symbolism, marched unopposed into Vienna in March 1938, he knew to parade around the Ring Street before entering the city center in triumph.

Sieges mark history suddenly and irreversibly, and as they unfold, they suspend the ordinary pace of time. Sieges are states of temporal exception, with delay as the essential strategy of the besieged.[48] Beginning suddenly, siege intensifies the days, weeks, and sometimes years of its duration, dependent as endurance is on the strength of walls, the availability of food and water, the unity of the besieged, and the might, exposure, and determination of the besiegers. With these and countless other variables in play, time no longer flows smoothly, breaking under the threat of approaching catastrophe as the walls give way, wells dry up, storehouses empty, and epidemics rage. During the ten-month siege of Sancerre, when in 1572–73 the Huguenot populace held out—unsuccessfully—against the Catholic armies of King Charles IX, the besieged swiftly consumed all stockpiled food and edible livestock, then turned to the horses, cats, dogs, rats, moles, and mice for sustenance. "Necessity, the mistress of the arts" led people to find nourishment in scraped, washed, soaked, and boiled animal skins, and when these leathers had all been eaten, "the more subtle and ingenious" among the citizenry turned to vellum, "and not only blank parchment, but also letters, legal titles, printed books and manuscript, not hesitating to eat the most ancient of them, some as old as 160 years."[49]

A Protestant minister and New World traveler, Jean de Léry endured thirst and starvation at sea and reported cannibalism among the Tupinamba. He also survived the siege of Sancerre to write a book about it. His *Memorable History of the Town of Sancerre* details how exactly to turn libraries into food: "one fricasseed" the soaked and boiled parchment "like tripe, or cooked them with herbs and spice

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in the manner of a hochepot," adding: "I could still see the printed or written letters, and you could read what was written on the pieces that were flattened out and ready to eat."[50] Even horses' hooves could be made palatable, and bread could be baked of straw and slate. Some looked elsewhere for nourishment. A couple was discovered to have eaten the brain, liver, and viscera of their three-year-old daughter, who (they claimed) had died of hunger. When they were caught, "the tongue, as thick as a finger cooked, was ready to eat. Two thighs, legs, and feet stood in a cauldron with vinegar, spices, and salt, to be cooked and placed on the fire."[51] The culprits were executed to set an example; otherwise cannibalism might have spread, reducing Sancerre to an even more terrible state.

During siege life becomes bare survival, and not only for the besieged. Besiegers risk counter-siege, poor morale, and disruptions to their supply chain. Bertolt Brecht wrote *Mother Courage* in exile in 1939, in response to Hitler's invasion of Poland. Set during the Thirty Years' War, the play follows the titular heroine's journeys through the Polish countryside in the baggage train of the Swedish army. In a quarrel with a cook, to whom she wants to sell a sorry capon, Mother Courage explains that prices have to be high "in a siege." To which the cook replies, "But we're not 'in a siege,' we're doing the besieging, it's the other side that's 'in a siege,' when will you get this into your head?"[52] Siege is the extreme state of collective historical experience. The Greek literary canon centers on the sieges of Troy and Thebes, and in the Hebrew Bible, in the direst passages of Deuteronomy and the darkest warnings of the prophets, siege represents the ultimate human calamity: "a distant nation [...] whose language you do not understand" will sweep in to enslave and "exterminate you," warns the Deuteronomist. Not only will the enemy be wholly alien, piercing the protective enclave, but you will become enemies to yourselves, friends against friends, parents against their offspring: you will "eat your own children" (Deuteronomy 28:49, 53). Sieges are commonplace. Wikipedia posts thousands of articles on individual sieges, several hundred for the seventeenth-century alone, when the increasing power of gunpowder artillery prompted reciprocal advances in the architecture of protective walls. Visited on countless peoples for at least five millennia, sieges have etched themselves into human memory, encompassing a range of extreme states both real and metaphorical: Israel besieged by enemies and by God, the pious Christian besieged by temptations, lovers besieging their beloved, the state of nature as perpetual siege, the mind besieged by sense impressions. Some metaphorical extensions of siege have epochal consequences. In Napoleonic law, and in modern polities ever since, civil unrest can be termed, and treated militarily, as a "fictive" state of siege.[53] Opponents inside the city walls can be treated like external foes.

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If in Judaism exile became the object of ceaseless ritual remembrance, this was perhaps because siege, like extreme physical pain, is better forgotten. The verse in Deuteronomy describing how a mother will begrudge her husband and children "the afterbirth of her womb," intending to eat the placenta and fetal membranes—and her offspring too—secretly herself, is read swiftly and silently during the annual Torah cycle. Siege brings warfare home, and potentially undoes even that enclave. "No one today has the faintest idea of the boundless amount of theoretical writings on the building of fortifications," notes W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz, "no one now understands its simplest terms, *escarpe* and *courtine*, *faussebraie*, *réduit*, and *glacis*." Useless for defense, the old walls survive as one of literature's powerful "time-spaces"—spaces "charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."[54]

Works of the visual arts do not *happen* in the way texts do. True, their creation takes time. A painting—as that verbal noun suggests—comes into being through a sequential process of applying pigments in layers to prepared or unprepared ground, and (in most Old Master techniques) of waiting for these layers slowly to dry. Some painters expose process itself by allowing the layers to appear as such, or by making the event of the brushstroke stand forth. Max Beckmann painted his *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo* over many weeks in 1927, and when the canvas left his studio it was meant to look in crucial passages unfinished (plate 18). That way the viewer could imagine the struggle that brought it about. And that way the viewer had to "take part in the construction of the painting," as William Kentridge put it, commenting on Beckmann.[55] The *Self-Portrait* becomes a puzzle about layers—black and white, shiny and matte—and which has the upper hand. Hieronymus Bosch distinguished himself from his contemporaries by impulsively executing certain parts of his paintings. He drew with his brush sometimes wet on wet, in one go, the hellish hybrids that made him famous. Bosch also made the first finished and collectable drawings in the Netherlandish tradition, because in drawings, much more than in paintings, the time of making shows. Kentridge made process and procession his central theme. He became an artist through a rigorous commitment to the medium of drawing, and in his animated drawings he tells a story about drawing itself.

Taking time to create, artworks are also experienced in time. Artists work in this condition, and the artists explored in this book work actively with this condition. Like most painters of his day, Bosch made winged altarpieces that opened and closed, and therefore displayed or hid, at the tempo of liturgical time, their shutters closed except on Sundays and saints' days. When Bosch worked for noble collectors he also made his paintings in triptych form: even in a palace,

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where framed paintings hung static on the wall (as they do in museums today), Bosch triptychs required opening of their shutters (plates 1 and 2). Seeing their climax became a dramatic event. Beckmann began painting triptychs in 1932, on the eve of Hitler's coming to power. Though not movable, the three-canvas structure endowed his ensembles—Beckmann made nine of them—with restless energy, their imagery jumping fitfully from frame to frame (plate 20). Through the triptych form, Beckmann reached back before the modern gallery picture—that beautiful whole set apart from the world—to images like Bosch's that stood embedded in religious mysteries. Several of Kentridge's breakthrough drawings and prints form triptychs, too, including his Beckmann-inspired *Dreams of Europe* and his silkscreen *Art in a State of Siege*—our titular work (fig. 74, plate 25). Dividing the visual field exposed viewing as an active process. Kentridge called this "meeting the object halfway" and understood it as the ethical condition: the observer morally implicated in the observed.[56] In his "Drawings for Projection," Kentridge found a novel way of making his images—often about time—happen in time. We explore this through one of the artist's core motifs, the body of a victim of state violence disappearing in the landscape.

In his *Laokoön* (1766), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing distinguished painting from poetry by painting's use of "figures and colors in space rather than articulated sounds in time." If painting aspires to depict human bodies engaged in significant action (as ambitious artists of Lessing's time tried in their history paintings to do), and if bodies "do not exist in space only, but also in time," each "moment of their duration" being the result of a prior moment and the cause of a subsequent one, then painting must seek "the center of the action," the "single moment" that is "most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible."[57] Lessing called this moment (in German, this *Augenblick*: "blink of an eye") the "fruitful" or "pregnant" one. And we will see what he means, for example in Bosch's unprecedented portrayal of Adam's very first glimpse of Eve: the painter makes that *Augenblick* a nanosecond preceded by the whole of divine creation and succeeded, perhaps instantly, by hell (plate 2).

The focus here is less on the fruitful moment than on the dangerous one: paradise lost before our own eyes thanks to a cleverly timed portrayal. In Bosch the dangerous moment collapses time. The Fall occurs both "back then" in Eden and here and now, when with our inborn culpability we repeat Adam's ocular trespass. Modernist and contemporary artists, in this study Beckmann and Kentridge, rely on different stories, but their focus remains on the fleeting, perilous, and decisive present moment. This book is itself organized as a triptych. Each of its three parts tells the story of a single image through splintered moments in that image's

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career. The first concerns perhaps the most elusive painting ever painted. Created around 1500, Bosch's triptych refuses even being named, though today it goes by the provisional title *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (plate 2). The story I tell is largely that of the work's reception. I begin and end around 1945, with Germans reflecting on their different situations by way of Bosch's masterpiece. The second story fast-forwards to Beckmann's *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo* and its remarkable afterlife, one that morphs even as I write (plate 18). But the *Self-Portrait*'s creation in 1927 picks up threads of the story about Bosch. Point-of-view characters through whose eyes we see the *Garden of Delights* reappear to shed light on Beckmann. William Kentridge makes an appearance among Beckmann's beholders, and for good reason: he launched his artistic career partly through a retrospective glance at Beckmann, and it was Beckmann who exemplified what Kentridge called "art in a state of siege." The image I explore in Kentridge's oeuvre—the "body in the veld"—flashes up suddenly, and disappears, thanks to the artist's unique method of animation. In Kentridge, as in this book, siege "is not necessarily the subject" but, rather, "the starting point and the area of [the] work."[58]

Kentridge's phrase "art in a state of siege" named what was the case for South African artists working under apartheid. Siege also described how past art was perceived in emergencies. Beckmann's art looked different in Johannesburg in 1986 than it had previously, just as it looked different in Germany in 1927 than it did in 1933 under Hitler. In this sense, "art in a state of siege" is not primarily the work produced during, or addressing, the dangerous moment. It is rather a perspective on art arising in that moment—what Bosch's triptych looked like to the Duke of Alba subduing rebellion in the Netherlands, or to Carl Schmitt in prison in Nuremberg, or to Erwin Panofsky lecturing at Harvard. Or to us today, with some 200 million people around the world living in declared states of emergency, democratically elected officials contesting the rule of law, and the capital of the United States besieged and stormed. "The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers," observed Walter Benjamin, himself besieged in Nazi-occupied Paris in 1940. Danger affects "content" because of what happens to a tradition, whether it is celebrated, destroyed, or rewritten; danger does this to each reception, especially when the stakes are high.

I have borrowed Kentridge's phrase and applied it retroactively to Bosch's *Garden* and Beckmann's *Self-Portrait*. Both these paintings were produced under emergency conditions. Yet countless artworks have been created in extreme states, so why my triptych? Bosch, Beckmann, and Kentridge all responded to siege with the "military irony" particular to satire.[59] The vices or human frailties that each artist's humor attacks may differ, but the polemical edge of their humor is similar.

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All three are also compulsive self-portraitists, Bosch obliquely, Beckmann and Kentridge directly. Reflecting on their own activity, these artists foreground process and accident in the creation of images. Walking a tightrope between the base and the exalted, they direct a militant irony against themselves. Originally, I meant the triptych to represent three different scales of distance from the present: the premodern, the modern, and the contemporary. Each also involves distinct forms of engagement with the past: historical for Bosch, pedagogical for Beckmann, and living and interpersonal for Kentridge. Despite connections among the parts, I admit the triptych remains an idiosyncratic collage—like Warburg's collages, more symptom than symbol. I study in three parts what art looks like in a state of siege, when images "flash up," as Warburg's Nympha did, singling each of us out in history. For as Benjamin wrote during the siege he did not escape, "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."[60]

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