

# *SURVIVALS*

## *THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF HARIS EPAMINONDA*

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The past and the present

The complexity of images and the consequent inexhaustibility of the viewing experience are two of the traits that the theory of photography has often emphasized, since the partiality of the framing always brings with it a decisive opening of meaning. Photography never saturates the whole real, since it can show it only partially, but at the same time it is also more than the real, since it is never complete and never univocal, it always refers also to something else: this is its richness and its freedom, against any totalising interpretation of the image. Many theorists have reflected on this openness of images, in other words on the excess of images with respect to simple representation, identifying two main modalities: on the one hand, as a gap in the image that attracts the viewer's gaze, opening a path of vision and thought that refers to something else; on the other hand, as stratification, duplicity, overlapping of various levels. In the background there is always the idea of a richness and an excess of artistic images compared to what is shown, so that thinking of them in a simply mimetic relationship with the real is insufficient.

The idea of an excess understood as a void that opens up within the field of representation, as a hole through which the spectator can see beyond, see more, is for example that expressed in the famous text *Camera lucida* (1980) by Roland Barthes, when the author identifies in the punctum that casual and purposeless detail that, in the heart of photographic representation, strikes us like a puncture, a wound and a fatality. The punctum is a wound that brings out contingency, possibility. We find the other perspective in Georges Didi-Huberman's text *Surviving Image* (2002), which takes up the figure and thought of Aby Warburg and

opposes him to the classic idea of art as imitation *à la* Winckelmann. Warburg replaces the mimetic idea, according to which artistic imitation would be a bridge between modernity and the ideal and forever lost object of ancient art, with a “phantasmal” model. That is, the richness of the image depends on the fact that art history is made up of ghosts, of returns and survivals. In this sense, the image is always double, or perhaps multiple, in any case stratified, and its origin is impure, never univocal, given that it does not begin once and for all, but in the end starts again every time, always.

The work of the artist Haris Epaminonda (born 1980, Cyprus. Lives and works in Berlin)<sup>1</sup> can be ascribed to this second line, the one that operates by superimpositions and not by ellipses. Since the early 2000s Epaminonda has been producing collages, photographic works, films, and installations using images taken from found books and magazines, often dating back to the fifties or sixties, as well as found footage material, in a conscious and creative stratification. The most striking example of this layered production is the *Polaroid series*, untitled snapshots that reproduce the entirety or often the details of printed photographs found as reproductions in books and magazines. The subjects of the images re-photographed by Epaminonda are many: architecture, sculptures, animals, plants and landscapes, images of tourist trips, safaris, ethnographic explorations and archaeological excavations, portraits, isolated figures or groups observing paintings, museums or panoramas. The photographs are sometimes in black and white, sometimes in color but suffused with a yellowish light; other times they present flashes of light, traces of uncertain origin (*Untitled #37*). The format, the brightness, the framing of details often produce a game between concrete object and abstract matter, in an alternative that becomes undecidable (*Untitled #66*). Epaminonda works on seriality, on association, on the superimposition of glances, and the transformation of her work on the re-photographed image seems to produce that return of which Warburg spoke, a repetition that is not merely mimetic but differentiating, capable of exploiting “this space of representation to create symbolic realms.”<sup>2</sup>

The choice of re-photographing images from the past and the use of Polaroids, now out of production, immediately places the question of memory and temporality at the centre of Epaminonda’s work. In this regard, however, we must first of all avoid the misunderstanding of a nostalgic, conservative, or devotional operation, since her work does not find its source of inspiration in the desire to return to the past, as the artist herself states several times: “Images need to keep open the potential of reading them always as if anew.” And that newness of which she speaks clearly alludes to the future: “What is in the image is the past caught in the present, which is the future”.<sup>3</sup> Epaminonda’s work goes in the direction of a re-actualisation, of a search in the past for elements and figures that can acquire a new charm, a new meaning for the present. The artist’s affirmations on the novelty and topicality of her images, on the fact that her perspective is always from the future, together with the deliberate outdatedness of the materials and themes, lead us to compare her work to that of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, a pair of artists who, since the

1970s, have been making films by re-filming materials recovered from film archives.

Going back to Warburg and his “phantasmal” aesthetics, this aspect of temporality is precisely what is highlighted in Didi-Huberman’s book *Surviving image*, in particular through Warburg’s concept of *Nachleben*, survival. *Nach-leben*-literally “after-living”—indicates the way in which a being from the past continues to exist. With this concept, according to which through images the past is put back into motion, Warburg introduces an idea of temporality specific to images that abandons the model of historicism and proposes itself as interwoven with counter-times, jumps and repetitions. This time of the image is a complex time, as Didi-Huberman writes, made up of the coexistence of heterogeneous moments. Every image is the result of movements that are temporarily sedimented or crystallised, that go through it according to a historical, anthropological, psychological trajectory, that come from afar and continue beyond the image itself. So much so that, as Didi-Huberman states in his text on Warburg, “in every age, indeed in every moment, art history needs to be reread and begun anew.”<sup>4</sup>

In both ways of describing the image as something exceeding, always open to new possibilities, what is in question is therefore its particular temporality. In the case of the image that is lacunose and inhabited by a void—a wound that opens a blind field, as Barthes wrote—the openness, the contingency, the emergence of possibility within a temporal fabric that would seem to have gained necessity and solidity in the plot of the story are emphasised. In the case of the complexity and stratification of various planes within the image, what is at issue instead is temporality as sedimentation and re-actualisation, repetition and movement, return. Not a return to the past, but a return of the past to the present, as happens in the figure of the ghost. And, to use Epaminonda’s words, this collapse between the past of the images and the present of the new photographic operation and their always possible return always concerns the future as well. The concept of *Nachleben* in Warburg, the same definition of the surviving Image that gives the title to the work of Didi-Huberman quoted at the beginning of these pages are, after all, as many ways to describe the special temporality, not linear but phantasmal, of Epaminonda’s work.

### Tableaux and living archives

The inaugural gesture made with the *Polaroid series*— to show the past, not to return to it, but to bring it into existence—is repeated in different ways in many of the artist’s other works. Epaminonda’s films of the *Chronicles series*, shown in 2011 in a solo exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, material shot by the artist with a super-8 camera, refer to the technique used in photography and collage. Each film was projected in a loop with a different duration, in order to offer a unique experience to each viewer. Also in her 2013 film *Chapters* (shot in Cyprus in 16 mm), the juxtaposition of a series of tableaux vivants mounted

in the film in a non-consecutive order and shown through a fixed shot seems to reproduce the mechanism of the Polaroid series. The careful staging of mythological and ritual situations in the ruin-rich landscape of the island of Cyprus—which has been described as the “construction of a contemporary mythology with a syncretic flavor”<sup>5</sup>—accompanied by an equally careful work on sound composed by Part Wild Horses *Mane On Both Sides* and presented to the viewer through an almost ecstatic temporality, wants to actualise the past through the technique, producing a re-enchantment. The artist in an interview in 2011<sup>6</sup> emphasises how the place where she was born, rich in historical stratifications that continually re-emerge in the ruins, in ancient objects, in fabrics, was her first unconscious inspiration. The abandonment of the use of found footage proves not a renunciation of the previous technique, but a paradoxical deepening of it, in which it is the artist who takes the responsibility of carrying out an impossible operation, that of creating an already existing material. In this case, if possible, there is an even greater adherence on the part of the artist to her idea of a relationship with the past: creating images that start from afar and continue beyond the present.

If these works on the collection of materials and seriality already refer to the Warburgian theme of the archive, Epaminonda explicates and develops this central theme for art history in her work with Daniel Gustav Cramer, *The Infinite Library*, a project begun in 2007 and still in progress. It is an ever-expanding archive of books made up of the recombination of pages from other books, published as far back as the 1890s to the 1980s. The images are disassembled and reunited in a disorderly manner, through a work of collage and recombination, and form a new set of pages, built from the content of the original books but also from the associations that develop during the realisation. The process of superimposition already at work in the photographic series is put at the service of a rethinking of the book-form, through the decontextualisation and reconstruction of the contents on the basis of unrecognisable criteria, far from authorship and verisimilitude. The critical distance, the strength of the expression comes from the power of the images themselves in their simple exhibition, detached from any narrative connection.

If artists cite Jorge Luis Borges’s *The Library of Babel*, one may also recall here Warburg’s best-known work, *Atlas Mnemosyne*,<sup>7</sup> a living, mobile archive in transformation, in which decades of studies on the images of art history are conveyed, showing how they continue to stratify and exist from antiquity to the contemporary. The interval, the rhythm, the relationships of contrast or association between one image and another are what makes the whole significant in Warburg’s project, an aspect that also seems decisive in the work of Epaminonda and Cramer. *The Infinite Library* seems to be closer to Warburg than to Borges, also because in this ever-expanding collection images are the protagonists and writing, when it appears, is treated as an image: since the possibility of following a narrative meaning is destroyed a priori, the pages containing words, sometimes mounted backwards, are used not for their meaning but in their materiality, they are

worth for their aesthetic poignancy or, to quote Jacques Lacan, more for the “signifier” than for the “signified.” They are words and letters-images, living after (*Nach-leben*) their first existence, brought back to life and re-enchanted through a new enactment.

## Repetition and difference

Underneath all these concepts, which insist on superimposition and duplicity, there seems to hide another fundamental concept for the history of art and aesthetics, but above all for philosophy: that of repetition. In what way does Epaminonda’s re-photographing turn out not to be a simple copy, a passive reproduction of the past, but a new shaping, a more penetrating vision?

In the 1968 text *Difference and Repetition* Gilles Deleuze proposes, alongside the idea of naked, mechanical repetition—the Freudian idea of repetition compulsion—another type of repetition in which a “differential” is produced: a continuous shifting and disguise of repetition that makes it become a new affirmation of a singularity. This type of repetition, which according to Deleuze finds in the unconscious, in language and in art the different fields in which to express itself, far from being a faithful coercion or mimesis, in the end proves to be the inalienable principle through which the difference in itself works, the true objective of his book. The difference in itself (therefore not the difference from), autonomous and released from its model, is a vital creative principle, and is constituted by a series of repetitions, in which it is never a question of adding a second, a third time, but of bringing the first time to the *n*th power. In this sense, in accordance with the idea of time proposed by Warburg (an author that Deleuze does not cite), if everything is repetition, a series of repetitions, there is no univocal beginning, no real origin to return to, but at least what is described in this Deleuzian text as a “dark precursor,” a sort of impure and obscure origin, a vital residue that survives in its repetitions—a role that in Epaminonda’s photographs is played by a series of objects and situations that (ready-made or not) refer to an antiquity that has been re-actualised.

The field in which par excellence it is possible to repeat the same by elevating to power, to enact, to present a different point of view by simple exhibition, is art. And it is precisely by reasoning on art and its repetitive and at the same time differentiating power that Deleuze’s book concludes: “Perhaps the highest object of art is to bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decentrings; to embed them in one another and to envelop one or the other in illusions the ‘effect’ of which varies in each case. Art does not imitate, above all because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by virtue of an internal power (an imitation is a copy, but art is simulation, it reverses copies into simulacra). Even the most mechanical,

the most banal, the most habitual and the most stereotyped repetition finds a place in works of art, it is always displaced in relation to other repetitions, and it is subject to the condition that a difference may be extracted from it for these other repetitions.”<sup>8</sup> Here the same that is repeated is sometimes a literal same, if we think of one of the most venerable ideas in the history of aesthetics, namely the theme of *mimesis*. However, we know that in artistic imitation is already inherent a differential element with respect to reality.

Among all the arts, in photography and cinema in particular the idea of a repetition that is not, however, naked, mechanical, is even more evident. On the one hand, photography and cinema seem to be the most faithful to reality, thanks to their mechanical genesis, but on the other hand they are also the most autonomous, almost the creation of a world apart, of a world of simulacra, of ghosts. Well, the particular strength of Epaminonda’s work is precisely the elevation of this principle, often hidden in visual works, to a real method, ostentatious

in its simplicity. It is a re-proposition that is all the more differentiating, through the movements made thanks to technique, as it is a literal repetition of an image that has already been photographed. Epaminonda’s images are doubles, ghosts also in the psychoanalytic sense of an unconscious past, of a real that is at the same time present in that it can always return. And such images are the more affirmative and different, creative, the more they are simple exhibitions, repetitions. If the definition of “double of reality” can be valid for all photography, the peculiar trait of Epaminonda’s work is that of exhibiting its principle, at the same time theoretical and technical. By revealing the power of a differentiating repetition through a simple operation such as re-photographing, re-filming, thanks to “displacements” sometimes as small as isolating some details, a new power is released from the images.

## Notes

1. Roberto Ago, in his article for the Italian magazine *Art Tribune*, includes Haris Epaminonda among the contemporary artists in whose work it is possible to recognize the influence of Warburg’s thought. Ago considers this resumption an excessively aestheticising mannerism, failing to grasp the intense resonance of Warburg’s methodology with the intermediality typical of our time. See R. Ago, “La sindrome di Warburg”, in *Art tribune*, November 2017, [https:// www.robertoago.it/La-sindrome-di-Warburg](https://www.robertoago.it/La-sindrome-di-Warburg).

2. Y. Leaver-Yap, “Haris Epaminonda: Images in search of lost time”, in *Map Magazine*, June 2009, <https://mapmagazine.co.uk/haris-epaminonda-images-in-se>

3. Ibidem.

4. G. Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art* (2002), Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017, p. 339.

5. S. Mudu, “Una strana sensazione di tempo. Haris Epaminonda, Anthea Hamilton, Pablo Bronstein”, in *Flash Art*, 347,

December 2019 – February 2020, <https://flash---art.it/article/haris-epaminonda-anthea-hamilton-pablo-bronstein/>.

6. Interview on the occasion of her exhibition at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UdLG3nMd9o>.

7. Seventy-one years after Warburg's death, Martin Warnke, with the assistance of Claudia Brink, produced an edition of the atlas based on the "last version": *Der Bilderatlas: Mnemosyne in Warburg's Gesammelte Schriften*, II.1, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000.

8. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton, London, 2001, p. 293.