

# GALERIE

## NYMPHAE\_M RAUSCH ECK

29.01.2016 – 19.03.2016

### An Exhibition by Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag

Curated in the context of POW by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Solvej Helweg Ovesen

#### Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

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Imagine the narrative of the Sirens. Those mythical goddesses or maidens who according to Greek mythology lure sailors with their enchanting sound and beauty to the abyss as they watch their ships crash on the islands of the Sirens somewhere in the Mediterranean to an unavoidable wreck. Imagine this being whose myth, beauty and cunningness have tickled the fantasies and wits of generations of artists, poets, thinkers of all sorts from time immemorial. It is said that the narratives go as far back as 750 BC with Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus recounts how Circe describes the Sirens:

»First you will meet the Sirens, who cast a spell on every man who goes their way. Whoso draws near unwarned and hears the Sirens' voices, by him no wife or little child shall ever stand, glad at his coming home; for the Sirens cast a spell of penetrating song, sitting within a meadow. But by their side is a great heap of rotting human bones; fragments of skin are shrivelling on them. Therefore sail on, and stop your comrades ears with sweet wax kneaded soft, that none of the rest may hear. As for yourself, if you desire to listen, see that they bind you hand and foot on the swift ship, upright upon the mast block - round the mast let the rope's ends be wound - that so with pleasure you may hear the Sirens' song.«<sup>1</sup>

And others including Shakespeare in his »119<sup>th</sup> Sonnet« or Kafka in the »The Silence of the Sirens« and countless artists have not been able to bypass the Sirens. As claimed by many authors after Homer, there were three Sirens, but we will come to this later. Whether or to what degree these water beings were/are related to water nymphs or nymphs in general, as we know how they have been portrayed by artists and philosophers alike is rather irrelevant at this juncture. Of relevance is the continued interest in, fabulations on and reverie of these beings that depict the bare chested girl with ripe breasts, voluptuous buttocks and other succulent features as seen in Waclaw Szymanowski's Three »Nymphs at the Lake«, Auguste Gaspard Louis Desnoyers »Nymphes au Bainc, 1830, Arnold Böcklin - »Syrinx flieht vor Pan« (1855), Lucas Cranach d.J. »Quellnymph« (after 1537), or William-Adolphe Bouguereau »The Nymphaeum« (1878), but just to name a few, in innumerable cultural iterations.

Then imagine the Berlin-based artist, media theorist and composer Jan-Peter E. R. Sonntag enqueuing at the tail end of this genealogy of thinkers and artists to reflect on the myth and the essence of these beings, these fantasies of men and their lolitas in efflorescence, well packaged in the grandeur of art and philosophies. Sonntag wouldn't be Sonntag if his reflections on this wouldn't be a queering of the aforementioned phenomena, and a twist in the tail of his own cultural heritage. Imagine one of Sonntag's point of departures is the

1 The *Odyssey* Of Homer. Translated by G. H. Palmer. Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Co. Copyright, 1891.

Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2008. 186 THE ODYSSEY. XII. 25–59. [https://archive.org/stream/BooksByHomer/The%20Odyssey%20by%20Homer%20%28Original%29\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/BooksByHomer/The%20Odyssey%20by%20Homer%20%28Original%29_djvu.txt)

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legendary 1924-1929 »Mnemosyne Atlas« by Aby Warburg in his effort to plot and map the »afterlife of antiquity«, thereby showing how Western antiquity connects through Alexandrian Greece to Weimar Germany by depicting how intellectual, symbolical or emotional images/ imagery emerge and reemerge, are activated and reactivated, animated and re-animated along and across history in arts and cosmology. Oversimplified, one could talk here of a culture of referencing. It is in this framework that Sonntag situates himself, on the one hand fulfilling Warburg's hope that the »Mnemosyne Atlas« would enable the viewer/ reader to experience the »polarities« that form conundrums in thought and culture, but on the other challenging the very content of the »Mnemosyne Atlas«. In line with our subject of interest, i.e. the persevering and persisting interest in the nymph, Sonntag looks at panel 46, which according to E. H. Gomberich encompasses variations on Ghirlandaio's fruit-carrying »nymph« an image supplementing Ghirlandaio's »Birth of John the Baptist« and other images by Filippino Lippi, Raphael and Botticelli, exploring the relational iconological values and historical contexts of the figure of the nymph. Looking at panel 47, he sees the nymph depicted as guardian angel and headhunter, as Warburg juxtaposes images of Giotto, Donatello, Botticelli and Ghirlandaio, thereby purposefully widening and complicating the symbol of the nymph that ranges from that guardian angel (creation) to the head-hunter (destruction). Only, Sonntag is of the opinion that Warburg's nymph is actually a Maenad – those beings, again in Greek mythology, that were/are said to be Dionysus' female followers, that are portrayed in a perpetual state of ecstatic manic frenzy as they dance and celebrate their intoxications and sexual lusts, his fans or groupies, as one might be tempted to call them today, whose name literally means the »raving ones«. We will come back to the rave in a bit.

Sonntag plots the chart further by looking at some thinkers that have either followed in Warburg's line or tried to span the bow from Warburg to our contemporary arts and culture like Giorgio Agamben. Essentially Sonntag looks at an old phenomenon of making constructs and the propagation of the constructs through cultures of referencing. The myth as narration constructed into philosophy, solidified by the arts and later re-legitimised by critical thinking. By pointing the finger to this phenomenon, Sonntag doesn't only point out the complications in repetition and reiteration, but also points out what is left out, and how that which was left out is continuously left out in that process of re-referencing and reiteration of the given.

But imagine if Sonntag would twist that process of continuity in twofold:

On the one hand by abstracting and maybe liberating the nymph or the maenad or be it the siren from its body. At least that body it has had to wear since the antiques till this day. Imagine in the gallery space two box-like structures reduced to the minimal from which emanates noise, rave or as Sonntag calls it »Rauschen«. Imagine another being in that space in the form of a hint of a body-wall painting that vaguely references Yves Klein and at the same time negates any connotation of anthropometry. Then imagine these are the three sirens, and the »Rauschen«, that enchanting sound as interpreted in an age of sound-programming, that lures the visitors to a kind of culture-world wreck, as the visitor encounters a non-voluptuousness, non-sexiness and non-succulence in form – very unlike any nymph, siren or maenad, while the maenad gives glory to its name as it raves through the »Rauschen«.

On the other hand, imagine Sonntag would expand, diverge, rectify, falsify and play with the concept of citation and referencing in his own footnotes – an installation of texts, images mapping his relation to this cultural and philosophical history. That of a white male in a Western world context and construct. Following, departing and questioning traditions, while relying on his own intuitive logics, but also creating new constellations, associations and synapses might be the order of the new old day. A process of repuzzeling through juxtaposition. Another form of a footnote atlas. Imagine that.

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Another dimension of the exhibition **NYMPHAE\_M RAUSCH ECK** will be a reflection and play on etymologies, meanings, synonyms and spinning associations. Imagine you take the term nymph and associate it to the white Egyptian lotus aka Nymphaea lotus, which has been used for various purposes, medicinal, as poison and or psychedelic aphrodisiac, since the antique until today. It is said that in Asian mythologies the lotus flower symbolises the female sexual organ, which brings forth life. Also, beyond the auditory understanding of 'Rauschen' as noise and rave, it is also understood as rage, frenzy, intoxications, delirium or inebriation – all in some way or the other associated with the sirens, nymphs and maenads. Imagine that.

## Interview

**Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung (BSBN):** We have been in conversation for many years on different theoretical and artistic interests we share. But far away from the nymph. What would you say is the germ cell or rather point of departure for this exhibition you chose to title **NYMPHAE\_M RAUSCH ECK**?

**Jan-Peter E. R. Sonntag (JPERS):** The point of departure for **NYMPHAE\_M RAUSCH ECK** was first and foremost the space, the architecture of the exhibition space with its rounded corner, typical for the modern 1930s architecture, as well as the place and the institution of a communal gallery in the multi-cultural Wedding of today. One aim was to define space in space in this particular context and to "swoosh" the volume of the architecture, creating a movement that is both endless and rotating in the space through the deployment of a technology and strategy that I have developed. The other objective was to reference the unmediated addressing of the visitors' body as a motive in art and cultural history. I instantaneously saw a trace, a body print, on the round corner of the gallery. The trace of the maenad, which has already played a role in my chamber opera SINUS: The trace of action in a space in movement. Via Lee Miller's reading of Eugene Adget's desolate images of Paris, which forms the nucleus of Walter Benjamins »Tatorf« motive, Aby Warburg's nymph panel is only a stone's throw away. In most of the post WWII avantgarde movements concrete depictions disappeared through abstraction until something abstract and simultaneously concrete emerged, consequently action replaced the formerly fixed works. The trace of action remains. Warburg follows the traces of the Dionysian part of visual arts, which Nietzsche in the emergence of the tragedy and its tendency towards Formauflösung (dissolution of form) sees only in music, and juxtaposes it to the Apollonian part which he – according to Winkelmann – assigns to visual culture. In tragedy the dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian forms a mutually dependent pair. Ecstasy, ritual, movement and inebriation represent the figure of the maenad and more broadly of the nymph. Consequently, Warburg follows this motive in visual and literary sources from Greek Antiquity via art in the Roman Empire and the monotheist Renaissance, until the profane imagery of his times.

**NYMPHAE\_M RAUSCH ECK** – this could as well be the name of a Wedding corner pub.

**BSBN:** Taking into consideration the architectural givens you came up with a sculptural concept befitting space and thematic.

**JPERS:** Originally I intended to turn the architecture itself into a two-channel sound system, by breaking the front walls in their centers and giving them an exponential form. That would have been a major structural intervention. Now I developed a horn system together with my team, in which the exponential midrange horn speakers with a diameter of 80cm are placed on pillars and have their acoustic and optical neutral point right in front of the central point of the front walls at 2,3m height, with the pillar behind them serving as bass-reflex system. Their proportions as well as the sound propagation will show that they

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were developed specifically as interfaces for this architecture and furthermore have the necessary acoustic fine resolution and speed of impulses, in order to blend with the architecture and the bodies.

**BSBN:** The »Rauschen« produced by the objects create an imbalance in space through a falling or rising gradient in sound. How is that to be comprehended from a scientific and performative point of view?

**JPERS:** In 1993 I first developed an endless ascending and descending swoosh for the staircase of the Ministry of Science and Culture in Hannover. The piece was based on an innovative and unprecedented spatial illusion, which I developed in collaboration with the programmer Jörg Spix at an IRCAM work station, drawing on Roger Shepard's research and Jean-Claude Risset's endless pure tone glissandi. Simply put, in place of the voices consisting of consecutive octave tones, whose mode shape corresponds to the sinus function in mathematics, the bell-shaped filters form a glissando parallel through the spectra of white noise. Our brain cannot recognize when the ascending or descending movement starts or ends, since what seemingly disappears above of our hearing spectrum is constantly pushed downwards. What remains is the impression of unending movements, which interact with our sense of vision and balance.

**BSBN:** Aby Warburg plays an important role in this exhibition. You reflect on his nymph, disagree, but revere his work. How do you relate your work in general, and this exhibition in particular to Warburg, also considering cultural gynealogy?

**JPERS:** Aby Warburg was already very present during my time as a student, back then especially his unfinished »Mnemosyne Atlas« was important to me. And after 2000 it was Warburg's lecture about snake rituals, which I came across in the course of my research about plasma and lightening – in short: 300 years of history of culture and technology surrounding the fluid of electricity. Like many others, I am particularly fascinated with the fragments, tableaus and sketches. In this project I follow the history of reception of Warburg's famous fragments, as well as the construction of panel 46 from his atlas and the papers on the nymph themselves. There are sketches of a fictive exchange of letters between a Dutch art enthusiast, who desires the fruit carrying maid in Domenico Ghirlandaio's Birth »Of St John The Baptist« (1489) in a Florence chapel, and Warburg, who is playing the part of a Apollonian art historian. It is not only the forms of expression of the pagan gods with can be traced though the Christian painting of the Renaissance – it is Warburg's complex literary and visual repertoire, which inspired Giorgio Agamben and Georges Didi-Huberman to follow Warburg's threads into contemporary culture. I am more interested in the figure of the maenad, than in that of the nymph. Warburg's central Ninfa florentina is first and foremost a maenad – the raving follower of Dionysos – not a goddess of nature. Maenads are strong women, who let the divine emerge through their secret dancing rituals. They tear animals and Orpheus apart in a state of inebriation and »Rausch«.

Until the romantic era there was nothing but the RAUSCHEN / swoosh of the trees, of the sea – it swooshed and inebriated, and it is not by chance that the German words swoosh (»Rauschen«) and inebriety (»Rausch«) share the same roots. In the digital age of mass communication, there is still more to the RAUSCHEN / swoosh / noise than being the disturbed opposite of the signal, which seems to have been overcome with digitalization and may only have an indexical quality nowadays. In 2015 I presented my oeuvre in a comprehensive show at WKV Stuttgart. In the passage of my »Referenz-Tableaus« I investigated the modern phantasm of a »totale Verschaltung« (total circuitry), including the printed circuit boards of Friedrich Kittler's synthesizers, combining his »Informationsmaterialismus« with the concept of compositions as technical kybernetic settings, as in Cage's »Variations V«. The immediate experience of **NYMPHAE\_M RAUSCH ECK** is the framework of a search for the traces of

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the inebriated nymph in a spatial setting between action space and laboratory. Nymphaea Caerulea is the name of the water lily species, whose leaves were used for an intoxicating infusion in the times of old Egypt. Nymphae is also a term for their inner labia.

**BSBN:** To your opinion, where does this everlasting interest in the nymph come from and why is it still propagated in the arts and cultures?

**JPERS:** The nymph has always also been an iconographic »formula« to transform the erotic interest of depicting female nudity, as well as heroes, martyrs and Jesus Christ for the male nudity– into something culture-historically sophisticated. Claude Monet's »Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe« would have caused a scandal if the sleeping women would have had the bodily traits and formulas of a sleeping nymph. In this age of pornography, those formulas are not necessary anymore.

The threads of post WWII modernity which influenced me in particular, from concept art to minimalism, as well as noise and New Music – were mostly devoid of depiction. All the more action, the body and space come to the fore. To me, the investigation of the motive of the nymph/maenad is especially useful in order to start a narration which starts long before Greek antiquity, which maenads in several cultures simultaneously and is suitable to reinterpret the notions of the »performative« and the »participatory«, which all too often are overused and voided topoi in our times.

Gombrich, E. H.: »Fragment of the Nympha«, in: Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, S. 105–127.

Agamben, Giorgio: Nymphs. Translation Amanda Minervini, Kolkata: Seagull, 2013.

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