

AFFINITIES

A BOOK OF IMAGES

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Foreword

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‘The only reason for time’, Einstein supposedly mused, ‘is so that everything doesn’t happen at once.’ Interestingly, though, it seems nobody can find *where* he said that. Which raises the question of space. Within it, things are permitted to drift apart. This cleverly resolves the obvious problem of everything being crowded into a single hyper-dense, dimensionless point in the cosmic void, and it also affords every blade of grass, every grain of sand, its peculiar dignity — its bold specificity and heroic autonomy. But there are costs: with space, it becomes possible to get lost; loneliness and disorientation are born. We suffer with these things, and can feel the stuff of the world similarly afflicted — what, in the end, is not, in some sense, *out of place*? What potsherd on this planet does not quietly keen for its kin?

All of which invites a gentle revision of the pseudo-Einstein quip: perhaps the real reason for time is so that *everything has an opportunity to find everything else*.

A giant job. But we must begin somewhere. *Affinities* is a good place to start. In this extraordinary compendium, Adam Green has gathered hundreds and hundreds of images from the most diverse sources. And in an act of generous, attentive conjuring, he has permitted them to find their company; they *associate with each other* in these pages, discovering intimacies, recovering relations, sensing ties. Those moments of charged propinquity take various forms: here a shared hue, there a glancing consonance in geometry; iconographic doppelgangers leap toward each other from the corners of the earth, uncanny twins birthed by different mothers. Flip through these leaves, and hear the whispering correspondences. Wander the branching path, and see everywhere signs of the mysterious forces that hold all things together.

Juxtaposition, form, visual rhymes, montage. These are powerful games — games tied to profound shifts in science, philosophy, and art. And this subtle book knows its history. There was a time when ‘form’ was understood to disclose the deepest truths of the universe: for Renaissance thinkers, synchronies of appearance were nothing less than the signatures of creation; hidden homologies could reveal the very handwriting of God. Later, this seemed pretty unlikely. Those same similitudes of form (in nature, in culture) came to be reinterpreted instead as evidence of congruent ‘forces’ — merely natural, and without metaphysical import. By the time the great German-Jewish scholar Aby Warburg began to assemble his iconic *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* in the 1920s, the project of coaxing ‘meaning’ — a higher meaning? a deeper one? — from the ethereal conjunctions of *similitudo* was splayed across the widening poles of science and art. Did the shiver of resemblance between the *Laocoön* and Hopi snake rituals tip open the *actual structures of human consciousness*? Or was the viewer merely swooning in mystical communion with the trance-dance of time? One might argue that the modern discipline of art history was born in that ambivalence.

But Warburg’s was a world of relatively few images, by comparison to our own — and they were cumbersome to configure. He pinned clipped prints to boards around his library, the better to discern the secret relations that propagated across time and space (defying both). *Affinities*, by contrast, is a book born of an image-world of unprecedented density and relentlessness. While the project takes the exquisitely archaicizing form of an actual book (a lovely one!), *Affinities* is a work that comes after the infinite scroll, and after the Warburgian image-games it has generated. One thinks, for instance, of Dina Kelberman’s uber-sharable ‘I’m Google’ (2011–present), in which a whisper-down-the-lane of internet pics creates a slow-motion morph across the weird seeability of our time.

The glory of *Affinities*, however, is the way it both is and isn’t in the grip of our moment. ‘I’m Google’ is a *nowness* — charged with the automaticity and algorithmic arbitrage that haunt us, driven by our current manias of deformation. Whereas what is achieved in this beautiful volume is that rarest thing: a reaching kiss across time. The result is an incandescent instance of what Hans-Georg Gadamer called ‘historically-effected consciousness’. Which is to say, *Affinities* is a work that manages to be *all about what was* even as it is simultaneously *all about now*. About our being in relation to the things that were. This book knows that the past onto which it opens is inextricable from the present of which it is a part — of which *we* are a part.

This is the highest magic of time, the time of *history*, wherein we unfold with the world. The historical world: that manifold of all relations; that disclosure of the impossible, ubiquitous, pervasive connections. Perhaps, then, the *real* reason for time is so that we can have history, where we find ourselves — and everything else. Go looking in the pages ahead.