

Under the sign of Giulio Camillo. A statement about past forward.

Francesca Zappia

As a project that connects art, memory and the web, *past forward* developed under the sign of Giulio Camillo's Theatre of Memory. A philosopher from the Venetian Renaissance, whose genius was praised and contested by his contemporaries¹, Camillo (1480-1544) sank into oblivion until 1966, when art historian Frances Yates redeemed him in her influential book *The Art of memory*.

The Theatre of Memory was a room-sized wooden amphitheatre of Vitruvian style he presumably built for Francis I, king of France, around 1530. This construction was a mnemonic system that was meant to activate in the spectator's mind the entire knowledge of that time. Knowledge was 'encoded' into symbolic images, which in turn operated as 'shortcuts' towards a variety of texts.

While referring to a philosophic tradition based on Hermetic-Cabbalistic scriptures, Camillo conceived his work as a precise system where the circular amphitheatre was divided into seven seating tiers, each one then segmented into seven sections². The resulting 49 parts had the front painted with one or more symbolic images and opened as drawers. Inside were papers with texts relating to the subjects recalled by the images.

The 'spectators' of Camillo's Theatre stood on the stage and looked at the 'spectacle of knowledge' in front of them, which they were able to understand because of their capacity of reading the meaning of the pictured symbols according to their placement in the theatre. Similarly, we stand behind our screens watching at the spectacle of knowledge that unfolds in the Web. If the symbolic images of the Theatre of Memory can be compared to hyperlinks to a variety of contents, we can also actively engage with the knowledge online either by creating links and associations within stored information or generating new content.

In his essay *Inventing Interfaces. Camillo's Memory Theater and the Renaissance of Human-Computer Interaction*³, media culture theorist Peter Matussek highlights how, after the publication of Frances Yates' *Art of Memory*, the Theatre of Memory became a source of inspiration for (new media) artists as well as for information researchers⁴.

In order to be able to describe Camillo's work, Frances Yates retraced the history of the art of memory back to its origins in the ancient Greece, when the poet Simonides of Ceos, the only survivor amongst the guests of a banquet after the building's roof fall down on them, could identify the corpses by recalling their position in the space. The art of memory evolved within the classic rhetoric as a way to convert ideas into images and to 'place' them in correspondence with the ornamentations of a building. This mnemotechnic process was extensively used by the Roman orators to recall their discourses following a precise and logic construction. In order to remember their speech, they had to mentally go back to the place where they had symbolically deposited the images, and 'walk through it' to unfold their ideas.

When in the 1970s MIT scientists gathered around the working group “Augmentation of Human Resources in Command and Control through Multiple Media Man-Machine Interaction”, they specifically referred to the art of memory as a way to develop a new technology that would be intuitive to use for everyone. Conclusions of this research were published in 1976 under the title *Spatial Data Management*⁵. The Principal Research Scientist Richard A. Bolt drawn a parallel between this art and the way we organise and find objects in our everyday life, because we give them a place. Eventually, results from this research led to the creation of the Apple Mackintosh in 1984, which instead of typed commands uses a more intuitive system based on icons placed on a virtual desk.

Similarities between the interface of our computers and the Theatre of Memory become to unfold: the icons on our desks allow us to open files, thus referencing different kind of contents in the same way the images located in Camillo’s theatre systematised a series of texts. We also position these icons within our hard drives according to a subjective organisational structure; we build our own system of memory in order to easily organise and find our documents.

Likewise, the World Wide Web works on an infrastructure of hypertexts and hyperlinks, and echoes the same non-linear display of knowledge of the Theatre of Memory. The Web has prompted a shift in our way of thinking that fosters new connections and interdisciplinarity. It has disrupted previous, crystallised, narrativities to unlock new possibilities of reading and producing knowledge, and has marked a diversion from the thinking that permeated culture since the Printed Revolution. Similarly interfering with the Modern/Enlightenment tradition is the way we approach knowledge today, which has switched from a passive mode of reception and transmission into the active one of production. This gives a sense of déjà vu:

By placing the visitor on the stage and the memory images on the surrounding tiers usually reserved for the audience, Camillo turns the user of his device into an actor. This actor’s mind is stimulated by the arrangement of the images in an order that prompts him to combine their meanings and perform his own recollection activities. [...] To express it in rhetorical terms: It was neither the *dispositio*, the arrangement of subject matters, nor the *memoria*, but rather the *inventio*—the creation of ideas—that was Camillo’s main concern.⁶

In this quotation, Peter Matussek highlights the performative nature of Camillo’s system “that could generate any idea by permutation of their elements⁷”. Therefore, he insists, it was the order in which the images were displayed within the theatre that was important to stimulate the mind. As a demonstration, he takes the example of an image depicting three heads of a wolf, a lion and a dog, symbol of Prudence. In his painting *Allegory of Time Governed by Prudence* (ca. 1550), Titian portrays the heads of the same animals beneath three heads of men at different ages, representing past, present and future. As related to Prudence, the allegory expresses the phenomenon of time and how it must be wisely used. Positioned at different levels and sectors of the Theatre the image takes different meanings,

symbolising in turn man being subject to time, ephemerality and attempts to stop time. It is therefore in the permutation of the meaning that underlies the dynamic of the creation of ideas in Camillo's work.

In their essay *Artists as iconographers*⁸, art historian and artist Garance Chabert and Aurélien Mole look at artists such as Luis Jacob, Ryan Gander, Harris Epaminonda, Aurélien Froment, Pierre Leguillon, Mark Geffriaud, or Sara VanDerBeek, as the last generation of what they have called 'artists as iconographers'. The iconographers are part of an artistic tradition that dates back to the photomontages of the historical avant-garde, and developed through the archive installations of Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski and Marcel Broodthaers, and the Appropriations of Sherrie Levine, Elaine Sturtevant or Richard Prince. The younger generation of artists, the 'iconographers-astronomers', produce constellations of images and have been strongly influenced by the atlas *Mnemosyne* created by art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg (1866-1929).

Mnemosyne was meant to retrace the survival of artistic motifs from the Antiquity to the Renaissance. Warburg worked with series of black and white reproductions of artworks, or details, of different epochs. Each series was displayed on a black board to show formal similarities, thus highlighting how symbols, figures, gestures and pathos formulas 'migrated' in time and space; it was then photographed to become a plate, the reproductions were successively removed, and the panel greeted another assemblage. A same operation was performed with the books in Warburg's library – they were constantly moved and rearranged creating new associations and new interpretations.

For his lectures, the art historian was used to recompose the assemblages of reproductions and to pin them on black boards that were displayed in the Warburg Institute's reading hall. As in the Theatre of Memory, knowledge was displayed within a three-dimensional space, and correspondences operated between these constellations of images.

In such a momentum the atlas actually turned into a common site for contemplating images and for reflecting the historical and iconological relationships between them. In this situation, that is to say when the *Mnemosyne* atlas was *in situ* and *in actu*, the series of plates effectively constructed a sort of *Denkraum*, a common space for thought. Both the spacing of the plates as well as the intervals between the images opened up a new space for thinking, reading, interpreting, - and for seeing, discovering and re-reading the history of images, of iconology and of culture. In this kind of material culture of an atlas technique Warburg found the ideal form for presenting his idea of an *Ikonologie des Zwischenraums*, an iconology of interval, or better, interspace [...].⁹

Warburg's oeuvre resonates in the practices of the artists 'astronomers' analysed by Chabert and Mole. Images of different nature – masterpieces, snapshots, extracts of films – are assembled in non-hierarchical combinations. While they have been influenced by the Web's horizontal display of contents and access to millions of images through databases, these artists also reproduce the same conceptual gesture the art historian did a century before, that is to say to create anachronistic constellations of images and to work in the interspace,

the interval of meanings between each other. The constellation, indeed, "conceived as an articulated ensemble, amplifies the polysemy of each part"¹⁰.

Whether the authors refer to artists that specifically work with images, their analysis can be extended to embrace other artistic practices that dive into the knowledge of the past to create new forms of display, where images, texts, found and freshly produced objects are assembled and associated according to the paradigm of the interspace.

As Chabert and Mole observe, the 'astronomers' "adopt an approach that is closer to the collector's than the archivist's". I would add they also assume the curator's attitude. When it comes to produce an artwork, they dive in their accumulated images and resurface with a selection of them. As philosopher Boris Groys states¹¹, boundaries between the artistic and curatorial practice have become porous since Duchamp selected an object and gave it the status of readymade artwork. Hence, selection is become an integral part of the creation, and with it the editing, the assemblage, which creates intervals of meaning. As the selection reflects a subjective sensitivity, interspaces invite the visitors to create their own connection and interpretations while navigating the artwork.

The philosopher also highlights the importance of the installation in contemporary art, which

demonstrates the material of the civilization in which we live particularly well, since it *installs* everything that otherwise merely *circulates* in our civilization. Hence the installation demonstrates the civilizational hardware that otherwise remains unnoticed behind the surface of circulation in the media. And it also shows the artist's sovereignty at work: how this sovereignty defines and practices its strategies of selection.

That is why the installation is not a representation of the relationships among things as regulated by economic and other social orders; quite the contrary, the installation offers an opportunity to use the explicit introduction of subjective orders and relations among things in order to call into question at least those orders that must be supposed to exist "out there" in reality¹².

*

As a platform that supports artistic production within the Web, *past forward* encourages artists to engage with a process of exploration of the Web / research online and to reuse copyright-free documentation to unlock subjective, alternative or imaginary scenarios to read our cultural past and produce fresh knowledge.

To make that possible, *past forward* asks the question: How can we rethink the installation within the space of the Web? Which formats would that take? In which way intervals of meanings between contents will become manifest?

The meaning of installation here still refers to the analysis of Boris Groys, whose reading quoted above is extended in another essay¹³ with a different perspective, that of the installation as an artwork and as an inscription in life – a physical space where the visitor is

invited to enter, move around, interact. As previously seen, this form of art pays attention to things that normally merely circulate in our society. Within these things we can find reproducible images and texts, which Groys gathers under the name of 'art documentation':

Art documentation [...] acquires through the installation an aura of the original, the living, the historical. In the installation the documentation gains a site—the here and now of a historical event. Because the distinction between original and copy is entirely a topological and situational one, all of the documents placed in the installation become originals. If reproduction makes copies out of originals, installation makes originals out of copies¹⁴.

As we engage daily with the bidimensional space of the Web to the point where we can call it a parallel world in which we work, research and socialise, how this space can become simultaneously a space of art and life, where Web contents are reterritorialized so to acquire new interpretations and meaningful relations?

past forward invites visual artists with a research-based practice for an online residency directed towards an exploration of the Web and a production of an original project for the virtual space. But what are, specifically, the research-based practices the project aims to support?

As we have seen above, *past forward* is particularly passionate with forms of art that have a performative look towards knowledge – artists that have an associative thinking, weaving links towards disciplines, creating new meanings.

Contemporary art research-based practices have been influenced by the digital archive and an overgrowing accumulation of resources about the past that have allowed them to make minor histories and alternative narrations emerge. This preoccupation for the past expresses what Claire Bishop calls the 'dialectical contemporaneity', which draws upon Agamben's notion of the contemporary as "that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism¹⁵".

In *Radical Museology*, Claire Bishop looks at examples of museums that have enacted the 'dialectical contemporaneity' and reimagined radical displays of their collection. The permanent collection "requires us to think in several tenses simultaneously: the *past perfect* and the *future anterior*. It is a time capsule of what was once considered culturally significant at previous historical periods [...]"¹⁶. It is possible to think the same about art works or installations which *modus operandi* is an assemblage of selected objects, images or texts. Artists, as curators, have a same disjunctive relationship to time.

To conclude, quoting a beautiful passage by Hans Belting:

Today the artist joins the historian in rethinking the function of art and challenging its traditional claim to aesthetic autonomy. The dutiful artist used to study masterpieces in the Louvre; today he confronts the entire history of past cultures and in the process becoming aware of his own historicity. Anthropological interests prevail over exclusively aesthetic interests. The old antagonism between art and life has been defused, precisely because art has lost

its secure frontiers against other media, visual and linguistic, and is instead understood as one of the various systems of explaining and representing the world¹⁷.

¹ The debate that was going on between Camillo's contemporaries originated around the secretiveness he maintained towards the finished construction of his work. If for some this gave him an aura of mystery, other were more sceptical. These also criticised the way Camillo pushed further the precepts of the classical art of memory to include Ramon Llull's *ars combinatoria* in his system of memory. It also raised concern that the theatre had roots in an occult tradition that went back to the Ancient Egypt, and that it was taking up mnemotechnic techniques that were coming to an end with the invention of printed books.

² "The seven sectors are to be viewed as the seven pillars of Solomon's House of Wisdom, which hold, according to the holy scriptures, the whole universe. To make them distinguishable, Camillo assigns them to the seven planets of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic universe: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Each of these seven planets rules one of the seven segments of the theater, which describe the levels of the Aristotelian cosmos. The first three represent spheres of the macrocosm. On the lowest level (where the highest-ranking people used to sit in the Roman theater) reside the planets themselves—as the spiritual foundations of creation. On the second level we find the basic elements of creation, the *materia prima*, represented by the mythological image of the divine banquet of Oceanos, after Homer's tale. On the third level Camillo places the mixed elements, that is to say, nature, illustrated by the Homeric cave of the nymphs. The fourth level transitions from the macrocosm of creation to the microcosm of man, beginning with the most spiritual aspect—his inner being, his mind and soul. Camillo marks this by an image of the Graeae, the three sisters of the Gorgons who pass a single eye between them in order to see, which he interprets as an indication of the extent to which the "divine ray" of human understanding is external to the self. On the fifth level we find the human body, depicted by Pasíphaë with the bull. The sixth level is reserved for activities connected to biological self-preservation, showing Mercury putting on his sandals. The seventh level, finally, represents man's productive activities—from the crafts through the fine arts to science, represented by an image of Prometheus with a burning lamp." Peter Matussek, 'Inventing Interfaces. Camillo's Memory Theater and the Renaissance of Human-Computer Interaction', in Charlene Villaseñor Black and Mari-Tere Álvarez (ed. by), *Renaissance Futurities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019, p. 46-48.

³ Peter Matussek, *Ibid.*, p. 41–64.

⁴ Between many other artists cited by Matussek in his essay, we can find Robert Edgar and Bill Viola. Both of them, in 1985, created artistic projects referencing directly Giulio Camillo's oeuvre: Viola's video installation *Theatre of Memory* and Edgar's virtual 3-D model *Memory Theatre One*. Besides, while searching the web, a certain number of websites dedicated to Giulio Camillo attest of the importance of his work within the field of information technology. See <http://zitogiuseppe.com/camillo.html> for a compilation of them.

⁵ <http://i-n-t-e-r-f-a-c-e.org/MEDIA/PDF/Spatial-Data-Management.pdf>

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45 and 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸ Garance Chabert and Aurélien Mole, 'Artists as iconographers' (firstly published *Art 21*, 2009), *Artists as iconographers*, Empire Villa du Parc centre d'art contemporain, 2018, p. 275-291.

⁹ Sigrid Weigel, 'Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy', *Images Re-vues 4* | 2013, document 15. Online: <http://imagesrevues.revues.org/2934>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹¹ Boris Groys, 'Multiple Authorship', *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 93-100

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹³ Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation', *Ibid.*, p. 53-65

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2009, p. 41.

¹⁶ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology*, Koenig Books, London, 2013, p. 24

¹⁷ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987, p. XI.