

THE ANCIENT ART OF MEMORY AS A REFERENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS. PART I

A antiga arte da memória como referência para obras de arte contemporâneas. Parte I

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Abstract

In this article, we begin by addressing the ancient *art of memory* (*ars memoriae*), which spanned classical antiquity as part of rhetoric, and whose invention is attributed to the Greek lyric poet Simonides of Ceos in the pre-Socratic era. We review its origins – as well as providing an extensive description of its general principles and rules, contained mainly in three Latin sources by Roman rhetoricians – and its subsequent developments and transformations, before moving on to an exhaustive analysis of Giulio Camillo's *Theater of Memory*, a major representative of the changes that took place in the tradition of the art of memory during the Renaissance, under the influence of the main philosophical current of that period, whose ideas it would adopt: the *Christian Neoplatonic movement*. Finally, we analyse several contemporary artistic works that take the art of memory as a reference, particularly Giulio Camillo.

Resumo

Neste artigo, começamos por abordar a antiga *arte da memória* (*ars memoriae*), que atravessou a antiguidade clássica como parte da retórica, e cuja invenção é atribuída ao poeta lírico grego Simónides de Céos, na era pré-socrática. Fazemos uma resenha da sua origem - bem como uma descrição alargada dos seus princípios gerais e regras, contidos sobretudo em três fontes latinas de retóricos romanos -, e dos seus desenvolvimentos e transformações posteriores, passando em seguida a uma análise exaustiva do *Teatro da Memória* de Giulio Camillo, um representante maior das mudanças ocorridas na tradição da arte da memória durante o Renascimento, sob a influência da principal corrente filosófica desse período, cujas ideias adoptará: o *movimento neoplatónico cristão*. Por fim, analisamos diversas obras artísticas contemporâneas, que tomam como referência a arte da memória e, em particular, Giulio Camillo.

Key-words: *art of memory; memory; hermeticism; Giulio Camillo's Theater of Memory; contemporary artworks.*

Palavras-chave: *arte da memória; memória; hermetismo; Teatro da Memória de Giulio Camillo; obras de arte contemporâneas.*

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THE ART OF MEMORY

Greece during the period conventionally known as Archaic (c. mid-7th century-480 BC) made memory a deity, a fact that highlights the importance attributed to it, given its vital role in a society where writing had not yet been introduced. In Greek mythology, we find Mnemosyne, the personification of memory, who opposed Lethe, the goddess of forgetfulness.

The empirical invention of the ancient **Art of Memory** (*ars memoriae*) is attributed to the lyric poet Simonides of Ceos (c. 556 or 557–c. 467 or 468 BC), a contemporary of Pythagoras in the pre-Socratic era, around 477 BC, who is said to have been the first poet to demand payment for his services. The curious story of how it was invented is told in the form of a legend by the Roman orator and philosopher Cicero (Arpino, 106 – Tormia, 42 BC) in his work *De oratore* [II, 86, 351-354], in which he emphasizes the importance of order in the construction of memory, which is described as one of the five parts of rhetoric, and distinguishes sight as the most penetrating of the senses, the one that has supremacy over the others.³

According to this legend, the action takes place during a banquet at the palace of a nobleman from Thessaly (a region in northern Greece) named Scopas, who, after winning an athletics prize, hired Simonides to recite a poem praising his achievement. Shortly after doing so, Simonides was called out of the banquet hall by a messenger to meet two young men⁴ who insisted on speaking to him. He went out to meet them, but saw no one, thus escaping the fate reserved for those who remained there: during his absence, the roof of the banquet hall collapsed, killing Scopas and all his guests, who were crushed under the rubble.

As a result of the catastrophe, the bodies were in such a state that the efforts of relatives to bury their loved ones and identify their remains were futile. But, and here begins the part of the story that is most relevant to our interests, Simonides, the sole

³ On Cicero's account, see Frances A. Yates (2005, *passim*). This is the most frequently cited version, but several others are known (essentially similar in structure, with differences in detail) in other classical texts. The main difference lies in the attribution of the location where the episode took place, as already mentioned by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian in *Institutio oratoria* [XI, ii, 14-16], drawing attention to the fact that Greek sources do not agree on this point: cf. Frances A. Yates (2005, pp. 47 and 450, note 1 of chap. II). In addition to these classical authors, we find mention of it in Pliny and Aelius, among others. Later, in the form of a fable (*Simonides protected by the gods*), in La Fontaine (2018, I, 14, p. 34).

⁴Believed to be the demigods Castor and Pollux, whom he had praised in his poem, much to Scopas' displeasure.

survivor, was able to identify the bodies of all the diners according to their exact location in the room and return them to their respective families, as he remembered precisely *where* they had been seated around the table and what clothes each had been wearing, relating these details to their respective *faces*.

This story reveals the importance of an orderly arrangement for a good memory, and confirms the first and main distinction of the principles of classical *ars memoriae*: between the *places* (in Greek *topoi*) where we can arrange the objects of memory in an orderly fashion – like a palace, or another building, with “chambers” of memory in which we place images, where we can wander and remember in an orderly fashion the people, things, and facts that are necessary for the task at hand, such as memorizing a speech –, and the *images* (or *symbols*) necessary for mnemonic recall. Since Simonides, the art has undergone several transformations and an extensive set of rules and instructions has been added, but it has always retained, in essence, the importance of the interrelation between places and images.

Still in ancient Greece, mention should be made of the contribution of the philosopher Metrodorus of Scepsis, a contemporary of Cicero who lived in the 1st century BC⁵, who invented a mnemonic system based on the 12 signs of the Zodiac, with the celestial vault as the place of memory – the use of signs would allow for the rational organization of a system of places, and the memories associated with them, in a fixed and easily memorizable order, according to their known sequence (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, etc.) –, giving an astrological and cosmological focus to the art of memory. Metrodorus will later be cited as an example of classical authority by all future users of a celestial memory system, such as Jacobo Publicio, Johannes Romberch, Cosmas Rossellius, Giulio Camillo and Giordano Bruno, among others; and in the case of the latter, this invention will play a very important role, giving rise to what he called *ars rotunda* (or *celestial*), as opposed to *ars quadrata* (or *terrestrial*).⁶

⁵ He was one of the Greek scholars whom Mithridates VI Eupator (c. 111-63 BC), the last ruler of the ancient kingdom of Pontus (located in the northeastern region of Asia Minor, on the shores of the Black Sea), attracted to his heterogeneous court, composed of an amalgam of different ethnicities and cultures, which he intended to Hellenize, at a time when, with political objectives, he aspired to unite, like a new Alexander the Great, the various peoples of Hellenic culture to confront the growing power of Rome.

⁶ On Metrodorus, see Ignacio Gómez de Liaño (2005, pp. 29–51, 63–70, and 94–97) and Yates (2005, pp. 59–62). Until a few years ago, these were the influences generally referred to, but in the meantime, research conducted over more than ten years by Spanish philosopher I. Gómez de Liaño, which led to the publication of the monumental work in two volumes *El círculo de la Sabiduría*, has provided strong evidence that the influence of Metrodorus' mnemonic system may have extended much further than previously thought. According to Liaño's thesis, which is widely discussed and extensively documented, the astrological variant

In Greco-Roman antiquity, memory had a solid reputation, and the art of memory (*ars memoriae*) was largely applied to rhetoric. Classical rhetoric reserved a special place for memory, which was one of its five parts – along with invention [*inventio*], arrangement [*dispositio*], elocution [*elocutio*], and expression [*pronuntiatio*] – because the speaker's ability to persuade depended heavily on his capacity to store discourse, leading this need to the creation of mnemonics that allowed him to improve his natural memory. These techniques, which gave rise to artificial memory, left significant marks on Western culture and have survived to this day mainly through Latin texts by Roman rhetoricians, since the earlier Greek treatises have been lost.

Only a fragment of text remains, known as *Dialexeis* (or *Dissoi Logoi*, from around 400 BC), which contains a short section dedicated to memory, where another important distinction of classical mnemonics is already established: that which distinguishes between *memory of things* and *memory of words*. These two types of artificial memory, which both employ images, as described there, were already in use at that time.⁷

There are three surviving Latin sources on classical *ars memoriae*, all of which are found in treatises on rhetoric, in the section that discusses memory as part of that: Cicero's *De oratore* (55 BC); *Institutio oratoria* (circa late 1st century AD) by Quintilian; and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (circa 86-82 BC) by an anonymous master of rhetoric in Rome: although during the Middle Ages, a period in which it enjoyed great prestige, its authorship was attributed to Cicero. Of these, the latter gained the most relevance, generally cited in its abbreviated form *Ad Herennium*, as it is the only one on the subject that has been preserved in its entirety, given that the notes by Cicero (in *De oratore*) and Quintilian (in *Institutio oratoria*) are not complete treatises, and, as they stand, require

of Metrodorus' art of memory, after integrating the pedagogical-religious aspects of Mithraism – the mysteries of Mithras and the respective philosophical-religious orientation, sponsored by Mithridates VI Eupator as yet another form of opposition to the power of Rome, were instituted around 80 BC and ended up gaining widespread diffusion and popularity in the Roman Empire from the second half of the 1st century AD onwards. I – may have been the origin, a century and a half later, as its model, of the diagrams of knowledge and wisdom used by different philosophical-religious schools in the early centuries of the Christian era – which the author largely reconstructs – not least because these could hardly have arisen out of nowhere: those of the Setian-Barbelotic Gnostics (early 2nd century); the Valentinian Christian Gnostics of Alexandria (in the mid-2nd century) – the philosopher and orator Valentinus, a precursor of Neoplatonism, was the most important figure in 2nd-century Gnosticism; the school, not specifically Gnostic, led by Julian the *Chaldean* and his son Julian the *Theurgus* (late 1st century-mid-2nd century, during the reigns of the Roman emperors Trajan and Marcus Aurelius); the Manichaeans (mid-3rd century), among others; or even the mandalas of Tantric Buddhism (after the 6th century).

⁷ See F. A. Yates (2005, p. 49) and Jaques Le Goff (1984, pp. 22–23). The text can be found in H. Diels & W. Kranz (1951-52, pp. 405-416); there is also an English translation by Rosamond K. Sprague (1968, pp. 155-67).

the reader to have prior knowledge of artificial memory and its terminology. In practice, *Ad Herennium* therefore served as a model and the main source for the development of Greek mnemonics in later periods, being appropriate in its plan and content, and the precepts set out therein are at the origin of the future Western tradition of memory.

The general principles of the *art of memory* are simple. The first step is to construct a series of places (*loci*) in your memory, which can be real or imagined. The most common type of mnemonic place (*locus*), but not the only one, comes from architecture: like a house or other building (as spacious and varied as possible), with its various spaces and rooms, not to mention its interior decoration. After this construction, everything that one wants to preserve in memory is associated with various images deposited in these places [see figure 1]. Then, when one wants to remember what has been stored, one simply has to mentally go through the places, one after the other, in an orderly fashion. Such images should play an active role in the process of recollection (*imagines agentes*), serving as points of reference, as advised in *Ad Herennium*, and it is necessary that they evoke *emotional* effects.⁸

Figures 1 and 2 – J. Romberch, *Congestorium artificiosae memorie* (1533); human figure in the *locus* of memory. Petrus von Rosenheim, *Ars memorandi*, 1502, Pforzheim. Example of *imagine agente*.



Sources: Yates, F. A. (2005); Eco, U. (2007).

⁸ Regarding *imagines agentes*, Quintilian did not, however, share the same opinion as the obscure master of rhetoric in Rome. He did not advocate their use; to his cooler, more rational mind, they seemed useless for practical mnemonic purposes. Unlike Cicero (a supporter of *imagines agentes*), Quintilian recommends a simple and practical method for memorizing that, it can be said, has survived to this day: the visualization of a handwritten page on which the subject is written—divided into clearly defined parts and with signs or *notae* that serve as spatial reference points, he advises—which one wants to commit to memory, with “a faint murmur.” We are therefore faced with the historical ancestor of what we commonly refer to today as *reminders* or *memory aids*, whose widespread use throughout history is easily proven. On the use of *imagines agentes*, see Martine Joly (2003, p. 202), Frances A. Yates (op. cit., pp. 87 and 98) and Harald Weinrich (1999, pp. 190-191 and 276).

To achieve this result, the use of images was suggested, either imagined, unusually beautiful or, on the contrary, very ugly or misshapen; they could also contain comic effects or be erotic. Above all, their content should be surprising or unusual, as such images would be easier to retain, or difficult to forget, ensuring greater readiness in their recall, reducing the risk of interference between them by increasing the degree of discrimination. The application of *imagines agentes* [see figure 2], of various types and adapted to different circumstances, was a constant in the known history of the art of memory. In any case, the use of images of beautiful young women for mnemonic purposes seems to have been a widespread practice between the 16th and 17th centuries, that is, at the height of the Counter-Reformation, and even among members of the Church itself (who were heavy users of artificial memory techniques), as Italian researcher Lina Bolzoni points out, giving the surprising example of a minor friar:

[...] Girolamo Marafiotto, in his *Ars memoriae* (Frankfurt, Matthaeus Becker, 1603), advises walking down the street, looking closely at the most beautiful girls, imprinting their gestures and body movements on your memory, and then using them as *imagines agentes* (p. 19). He himself has verified, he says, that the method works: he has used it, in fact, to remember his sermons. Naturally, he has used them for edifying purposes: thus, for example, to remember the soul, he has resorted to the image of a beautiful girl he had met (p. 66). (Bolzoni, 2007, p. 202, own translation).

It is also, obviously, to the *imagines agentes* that Maurice Bernard and Jacques Roubaud refer when they speak of the application of the “principle of singularity” as one of the original features of the art of memory, which they find in a 15th-century work, the *Liber Memoriae artificialis* (c. 1429) by Friar Bartolomeo de Mantova, a copy of which is held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris:

Suppose we want to remember a spider. We will place it in a location, on a wall for example. Is that sufficient? No, this association is commonplace and may not stick. A master of mnemonics would say: place a woman standing in front of the wall, preferably naked, and place the spider on her breast. The incongruity of this association between the object to be memorized and the supporting image will ensure that we are unlikely to forget it. (Bernard and Roubaud, 1997, p. 25, own translation).

It should be noted that experiments carried out by modern psychology in the 20th century have shown that this type of unusual image does indeed promote memorization, particularly when the elements that constitute them interact with each other⁹. As for us, it seems that the use of *imagines agentes* is in line with the modern idea commonly accepted today that the most solid, durable, and consolidated mnemonic contents are those that involve our feelings.

During the Middle Ages, with the scholastic treatises of the Dominicans St. Albert the Great (1205-1280) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the rules of *ars memoriae* were Christianized, reinterpreted, and studied as part of the virtue of prudence¹⁰ (*prudentia*), witnessing a shift of artificial memory from rhetoric to ethics¹¹. These theologians will associate the rules of *Second Rhetoric*¹² with the ideas of Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscencia*¹³ (on which both wrote commentaries), transforming the latter, in terms of use, into a kind of "treatise" on the art of memory, similar to others¹⁴. And we must not forget that, according to the Greek philosopher's gnoseology, one cannot think except with images.

It should also be remembered that the rules of *ars memoriae*, as reinterpreted by scholasticism and studied as part of the virtue of prudence, especially those concerning images (i.e., *imagines agentes*), did not apply only to moral preaching, but found significant resonance in the descriptions and visual representations of three fundamental

⁹ See Michel Denis (1984, pp. 169–72) on this subject.

¹⁰ It was Cicero who, for the first time, made memory one of the three parts of the virtue of *prudentia*, alongside *intelligentia* and *providentia*. We should add that in the 12th century, *prudentia* was also referred to as *sophia* or *fronesis*. When St. Albert the Great discusses the virtue of prudence in *De bono*, which he specifically identifies with trained memory, he also uses the other two terms as synonyms.

¹¹ Also noteworthy during this period was Ramón Llull (or Raimundo Lullio, 1232-1316): this medieval philosopher of Catalan origin was an original thinker, primarily because his memory system, unlike others, was based on a logic that categorically rejected the use of any and all images, with the exception of explanatory diagrams. It was a combinatorial, synthetic art – which we will not discuss here, as it is not applied in any of the works of art we will address –, which used a logical system of correspondences employing circles (*rotae*).

¹² With scholasticism, the section dedicated to memory in *Ad Herennium* would be the main reference for artificial memory during the Middle Ages – it circulated profusely in manuscripts – where this treatise was mistakenly known as Tullius' *Second Rhetoric* (as Cicero was generally nicknamed during this period), while *De inventione*, a genuine work by Cicero, was known as *First Rhetoric* (or *Old Rhetoric*). This was still the case when the first printed edition of *Ad Herennium* appeared in Venice in 1470, published together with *De inventione*, both bearing the same title on the cover: *Rhetorica nova et vetus*.

¹³ Aristotle's theory of memory is essentially set out in *De memoria et reminiscencia*, which has been considered an appendix to the treatise *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), part of a set of nine short treatises known in the tradition as *Parva Naturalia*. See Aristotle (1930).

¹⁴ The combination of Cicero's already moralising rhetoric with Aristotelian psychology leads to a moralisation of *ars memoriae*, which becomes a repository and instrument in the service of the instruction of reason and faith. In this regard, the *Secunda Secundae* of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (1266-1273), in particular, where he discusses the four cardinal virtues, will exert considerable influence.

figures in the culture of the Late Middle Ages, and of all time; two poets and a painter whose importance in history is such that they warrant mention here, however brief: Dante, Petrarch, and Giotto.

Then, during the Renaissance, under the influence of humanism, the Art we are discussing entered a new cycle, a final burst of energy in which it perhaps reached its peak, before an inevitable decline caused by the birth of the printing press¹⁵: from the 17th century onwards, it entered into irreversible decline. The transformation began in Italy, from where it spread to conquer the rest of Europe, and was due to the influence of the main philosophical current of the Renaissance, whose ideas it would adopt: the Christian Neoplatonic movement, initiated by Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). From then on, it was subject to occult influences, within the Hermetic-Kabbalistic tradition¹⁶, and its greatest representatives are Giulio Camillo (Friuli, c.1480-1544, Milan), author of the famous *Theater of Memory*, a project never completed, and Giordano Bruno (Nola, 1548-1600, Rome), author of a magical system of memory with which he intended to *reform the mind*.¹⁷

¹⁵ The printed book is gradually destroying habits of memory - not least because, it should be noted, there has been a widespread increase in writing and reading, and books allow us to reread, meditate, and interpret, which has an important consequence: a culture of private reading, which relegates the spoken word to second place.

¹⁶ However, we should note that the main approach taken by the treatises that emerged during this period, which, due to the birth of the printing press, were published in large numbers, still descended from the medieval scholastic tradition, with which artificial memory reached one of the peaks of its influence. Worthy of mention are *Congestorium artificiosae memorie* (1520) and *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae* (Venice, 1579), by the Dominicans Johannes Romberch and Cosmas Rossellius, respectively. This is because the Dominicans were, naturally, at the center of this tradition. These are two very detailed and comprehensive treatises, designed to disseminate the Dominican art of memory, an intention clearly stated by Romberch. Both treatises, which were very influential and widely cited, when describing the different types of systems of places relevant to artificial memory, include – an inclusion that also occurred in Thomas Aquinas' *Secunda Secundae* – among these places the following: paradise, earthly paradise, purgatory, and hell. We will also highlight *Phoenix, sive artificiosa memoria* (1st ed., Venice 1491) by Petrus Tommai, known as Pedro de Ravena, a prominent jurist from Padua, because it was the most famous and universally recognized of the treatises, successively edited in the 16th century, translated into several languages, and published in many countries: the key to the success of this work, which “popularized” memory, was its approach to the secular world, allowing people to find an art of memory applicable to everyday life, a kind of manual on how to improve natural memory, as it emphasized the purely mnemonic side with practical advice; for example, his approach to the use of memory images is more traditional, advising us to choose people we know well, confessing that when he was young he used the image of his beloved. In his method, special emphasis should be placed on the importance he attached to *loci*: he boasted, in his *Phoenix*, of having 100,000 places in his memory, where he had stored all possible knowledge concerning the treaties of Italian law of his time and the Holy Scriptures, among other things. Furthermore, she notes that whenever she visited a new city on her travels, she took the opportunity to construct new places. For this reason, Yates (2005, p.136) finds in this particular aspect a possible influence from Quintilian, the only author among classical sources who explicitly mentions that a person can form new places of memory while traveling.

We should also mention the very particular case of a treatise by Matteo Ricci, which we will discuss in more detail later on when we talk about one of the artists whose work we have chosen to address.

¹⁷Without underestimating the English philosopher Robert Fludd (1574-1637), author of the monumental treatise *Utriusque Cosmi, Maioris scilicet et Minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica Historiae*, the

GIULIO CAMILLO'S *THEATER OF MEMORY*

Giulio Camillo Delminio (Friuli, c. 1480-1544, Milan), a man of letters and philosopher, as well as a master of rhetoric and alchemy, frequented the main artistic and literary circles of Venice and was one of the most famous men of the 16th century, particularly in Italy and France, whom his contemporaries called “the divine Camillo”. Friend of Titian, Serlio, and Aretino, as well as Cardinal Pietro Bembo, the famous humanist and writer, after his death he would still be remembered by Lodovico Dolce, Tasso, and Ariosto, who in the last canto of his *Orlando Furioso* refers to him with praise: “I see, (...) and the one who leads us to the ascreu stream by the flattest and most continuous route: Iulio Camillo; (...)”. (Ariosto, 2007, p. 727, own translation).

However, from the 18th century onwards – during which three works referring to him were published¹⁸ – he was practically forgotten until very recently. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that he never wrote the great treatise he always aspired to, in which he would expound his ideas for posterity; on the other hand, to the fact that the work to which he devoted much of his life's energy, the *Theater of Memory* that made him famous, was never completely finished. In fact, at the end of his life, Giulio Camillo was only able to dictate a draft of his *Theater* over seven mornings in January 1544 to his disciple and friend Girolamo Muzio, when he was in Milan in the service of the Marquis Del Vasto, Alfonso de Ávalos (1502-1546), who was the governor of Spain there, his last patron and protector, and due to the latter's insistence and persuasion, with the additional incentive of a large payment. Shortly afterwards, he died.

The manuscript was not published immediately, only appearing several years later in Florence and Venice (1550) under the title *L'Idea del Theatro dell'eccellen M. Giulio Camillo*, followed in subsequent years by other editions, generally cited simply as *L'Idea del Theatro*. It was this work, describing the universe in an eminently visual way, although it does not contain any diagrams or drawings¹⁹, that made it possible to reconstruct over time, as far as possible, what he intended with his Theater, as well as to

first volume of which was published in 1617 in Germany (Oppenheim; the second was published in the same city in 1619), and was dedicated to King James I of England. We should also mention the particular case of the work *The City of the Sun* by the Dominican Tommaso Campanella, which we will only discuss in detail in a later article.

¹⁸ Cf. Frances A. Yates (2005, p. 463, note 3).

¹⁹ There is a recent electronic edition of this manuscript, based on a copy from 1554 (Venice), as well as another electronic edition that reproduces a copy of the publication of his *Complete Works* in 1580 (Venice), which we indicate in the bibliography.

propose models for visualizing it, such as the one [see figure 3] we present here by the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680).

However, as its first editor, Lodovico Domenichi, and others who followed him, such as Lodovico Dolce, pointed out at the time, *L'Idea del Theathro* only gave a glimpse of the true work, referring to other texts and, above all, to the absent building, the famous wooden theater that was never fully realized, except in the form of small models that few people had the opportunity to see. In fact, in his dedicatory letter to the humanist Don Diego Hurtado de Mendoza in the first edition mentioned above, Domenichi even suggests that Camillo's reputation may have suffered somewhat because he “promised too much”.

The only person in the world to whom he could have fully explained how it worked was King Francis I of France (1494-1547; reigned from 1515 onwards), his first and main patron (after being informed of his project by Lazare de Baïf, French ambassador to Venice), from whom he received great attention and favors, and into whose court he was introduced at least from the spring of 1530 onwards – we have confirmation of this from Girolamo Muzio, who accompanied Camillo, through a letter written to his father from France in May of that same year. Francis I, in exchange for large sums paid to Camillo for the development of the project, is said to have imposed the condition that he not disclose the ideas involved to anyone: the *Theater* was to remain a secret of the king. And indeed, he complied with the agreement until a few months before his death. In any case, it is Camillo himself who begins the exposition of his ideas in *L'Idea del Theathro* by referring to the significance of silence that must be observed in the face of divine secrets – of which only the “chosen ones” are worthy – invoking the example of the oldest and wisest writers, in this respect drawing direct inspiration from Pico della Mirandola, who before him had defended a very similar position²⁰.

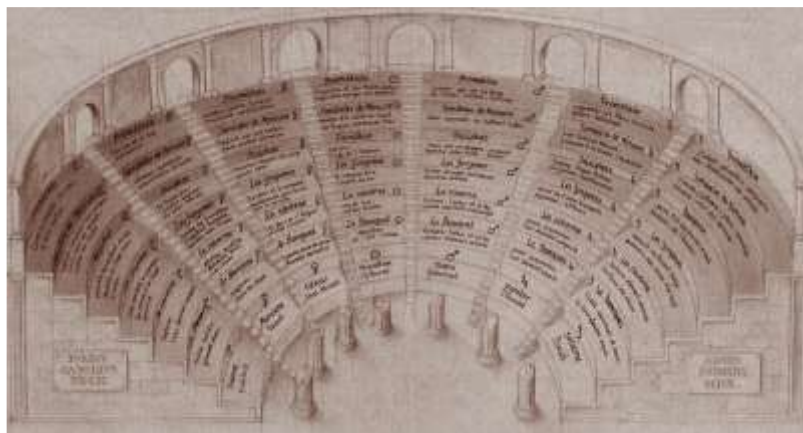
However, Viglius Zuichemius (or Zwichem), a friend and correspondent of Erasmus of Rotterdam, was able to meet Camillo in Venice in 1532, who allowed him to see a small wooden model of the Theater – in any case, large enough to fit two people inside. He recounted this experience in a letter he wrote²¹ to Erasmus from Padua in June

²⁰ See Pico della Mirandola (2001, pp. 95-97). And one can always argue, legitimately, that Camillo followed a premeditated strategy of only gradually revealing, in fragments, how his Theater worked, seeking in this way to maintain interest in the continuity of the project in exchange for new funding.

²¹ Regarding the letter, dated March 28, 1532, see Frances A. Yates (*op. cit.*, pp. 154-155). See also Corrado Bologna (2002, pp. 121) and Lina Bolzoni (2007, p. 214).

of that year. A rational religious thinker like Erasmus was not in favor of the use of mnemonic systems, and in particular magical memory practices. All this appeared to him as the remnants of medieval and scholastic doctrines, little more than a sign of intellectual barbarism, which in his opinion offered no practical use. In his work *De ratione studii* (1512), he stated: “Although I do not deny that memory can be aided by simulacra (*places*) and images (*pictures*), the best memory is based on three things of the utmost importance: study, order, and care.” (Erasmus, *apud* Le Goff, 1984, p. 33, own translation).

Figure 3 - Giulio Camillo's *Theater of Memory*, according to Athanasius Kircher.



Source: <http://blasderobles.com/Vania/kircher/images/camillo.gif>

A similar model of the *Theater* is thought to have been built later in Paris, perhaps in 1534, the year of the oldest French documentary source that records its presence; a letter sent by Étienne Dolet to François de Langeac in that same year explicitly refers to Camillo's wooden “amphitheater” (as Viglius also referred to it). It should be noted that both written testimonies, those of Viglius and Étienne Dolet, are considered reliable sources, as they come from two of Camillo's ideological adversaries, but they also largely reflect the growing envy that his good fortune with the French king was sowing, both in Parisian circles close to the court and in Venice.

There is no idea what happened to the model of the Theater built in Paris. All we know is that, in the 17th century, the well-known French antiquarian Montfaucon searched for it without success. The Venetian model described by Viglius also left no trace – when *L'Idea del Theatro* was published in 1550, its editor Lodovico Domenichi searched for it but could not find it. However, descriptions have survived to this day of a villa built on the outskirts of Milan by a nobleman named Pomponio Cotta, in which –

according to a written source from the time, by Bartolomeo Taegio (1559) – there were paintings or frescoes representing the “...incomparabile fabbrica del meraviglioso Theatro dell'eccellentissimo Giulio Camillo...”. (Taegio *apud* Bologna, 2002, p. 121)²²

In recent years, thanks to the efforts of researchers such as Lina Bolzoni and Corrado Bologna, it has been possible to locate two manuscripts by Camillo, which are earlier versions of what would later be published as *L'Idea del Theatro*, and like the latter, they also contain no illustrations. One is kept in the Vatican Library (cod. Ottob. Lat. 1777); the other, more extensive and presumably later, which was discovered by Corrado Bologna, is in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester (Christie, cod. 3, f. 8) and is entitled *Theatro della Sapientia* (*Theater of Wisdom*). What we find most interesting about these manuscripts is the opportunity they offer us today to appreciate, to use a contemporary term, a *work in progress*, opening up new perspectives.

Firstly, because according to Lina Bolzoni²³, they present us with a G. Camillo in a period prior to the influence of Jewish *Kabbalah*, whose attraction would later be so evident in his printed work, and who would have learned, in a version of *Christian Kabbalah*, with the Venetian Franciscan Francesco Giorgi (1466-1540). Secondly, because the manuscript *Theatro della Sapientia* (a copy of a manuscript dedicated to Francis I, now lost), although not as laboriously descriptive in the game of correspondences, explains in more detail and precision other aspects to which Camillo did not pay as much attention in what would become his “definitive” version. Therefore, having verified the notable differences between the three versions, for a better understanding of what Camillo actually wanted with his *Theater*, and of his ideas, a comparative cross-referencing of those versions should be taken into account. Furthermore, as Lina Bolzoni points out, for certain aspects it will be useful to consult another small work by Camillo published under the title *De Transmutatione*.

We referred *supra* to the influence that *Kabbalah* would have on Camillo. Before moving on to an analysis of his *Theater*, however, it is necessary to clarify another influence, that of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which is equally strong there, as it would later

²² This is a short guide – *La Villa*, p. 71 – to the villas near Milan and the collections of their wealthy owners. The visual representations of Camillo's *Theater* at the Villa of Pomponio Cotta were also mentioned by Girolamo Tiraboschi (1794, p. 1523). More recently, see Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher (2003, vol. 1, p. 249).

²³ See Lina Bolzoni (2006, pp. 20-30). We base ourselves here on Bolzoni, because unfortunately we are not familiar with these manuscripts.

be with Giordano Bruno. Explicitly cited by Camillo several times, is at the origin of the esoteric doctrine of Hermeticism and caused profound changes in the history of mnemonics. It would remain the *essential* text for alchemists and mystics for a long time, and even Sir Isaac Newton owned a copy, filled profusely with personal notes, which would have served as food for his own research as an alchemist, which he also was.

While the biblical image of Egypt focuses on Moses as the liberator, the central figure in the Greek image of Egypt was Hermes Trismegistus. The Greeks, in the Hellenistic period between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, identified their god Hermes, to whom they attributed the invention of all sciences (especially writing and magic), with Thoth (or Tot), the Egyptian moon god, master of knowledge and inventor of writing, and a magician, among other things, giving him the title “Trismegistu” (meaning “thrice supreme”). From then on, he became known as Hermes (or *Mercury*) Trismegistus and was considered the author or inspiration behind the writings known in the Greco-Roman tradition as the *Corpus Hermeticum* (as well as the well-known alchemical book *The Emerald Tablet*). Its authorship is now attributed to Platonic circles of the late Hellenistic period, roughly during the last period when the ancient Egyptian religion was still openly practiced. It may be that these writings were based on older texts, or more likely copies of originals that had long since been lost.

Those whom Camillo knew in his time, and who exerted such a great influence during the Renaissance – in his time considered Moses and Hermes Trismegistus (then regarded as a mysterious Egyptian priest to whom divine truth had been revealed) to be contemporaries; a mosaic on the floor of Siena Cathedral even refers to Hermes Trismegistus as the Egyptian Moses, that is, the Egyptian equivalent of Moses – are due to the Latin translation by the Dominican Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici.²⁴ Ficino completed the task in 1464, a few months before Cosimo's death.²⁵

²⁴ In 1460, Cosimo, whose interest in the occult was well known, was approached by an anonymous monk who possessed a collection of Greek texts, which he managed to convince him were the original sources of Egyptian occult knowledge, written by Hermes Trismegistus himself. Cosimo, carried away by enthusiasm and a certain naivety, bought them for a huge sum and ordered Ficino, the translator in whom he placed the greatest trust, to interrupt the important translation he was then working on – the almost complete works of Plato – to devote all his energies to these texts.

²⁵ The result would be published in 1471, in the form of a set of fourteen pamphlets entitled *Pimander* (also known as *Poimandres*), which was the original title of the first of these. Another pamphlet, *Asclepius*—which supposedly describes the Egyptian religion, and in particular the rites and processes through which the forces of the cosmos would be attracted to the statues of the gods – was already known in the Middle Ages in a Latin version erroneously attributed since the 9th century to Lucius Apuleius (Madaura, Numidia,

For the following analysis of Camillo's *Theater*, of which we will only provide a summary because its system is quite complex, we used as our main source the version published in Spanish, *La Idea del Teatro*, as well as some critical assessments of it by Frances A. Yates, Lina Bolzoni, and Corrado Bologna, and the comments of the latter two on the manuscripts that have since been discovered.

The *Theater of Memory* consisted of a specific physical location, a small wooden theater filled with images and written documents, designed based on the model of the Roman Vitruvian theater²⁶, a classic example of harmony of form, but in which the normal relationship between spectator and stage was inverted. In it, the solitary spectator, the center of intellectual activity, would find himself where the stage and scenery usually are, and would look out over the semicircular auditorium, contemplating the images encompassing universal knowledge, which were presented to him according to a specific structure. Camillo thus based his design on the layout of a real theater, but adapted it to his mnemonic objectives, increasing the activity of the user, who could move around the three-dimensional space at will.

This structure, on which the theater system is based, resulted from the division of the auditorium into seven vertical sections originating from seven columns (or doors) – the seven columns of Solomon's House of Wisdom (*Domus Sapientiae*) (in the *Book of Proverbs*). The seven columns were symbolized by the seven planets known at the time, represented in human form as was customary at the time. According to Camillo,

Solomon, in the ninth chapter of Proverbs, says that wisdom has built a house and set it on seven pillars. We must infer that these pillars, which symbolize unchanging eternity, are the seven sefirot of the supercelestial world, which constitute the seven dimensions of the creation of the celestial and the inferior, in which are contained the ideas of all things that belong to the celestial and the inferior. Hence, outside of this number, we cannot imagine anything. Seven is the perfect number, considering that it contains both sexes, since it is composed of an even number and an odd number. (Camillo, 2006, pp. 49-50. Own translation).

125-Carthage, c.180; author of the famous novel *The Golden Ass*). Later, in 1505, Lefèvre d'Étaples published *Asclepius* and *Pimander*, according to Ficino's translation, in a single volume. Then, it was thanks to the Genevan philologist Isaac Casaubon - in his work *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI. Ad Cardinalis Baronii Prolegomena in Annales* (London, 1614, p. 70 ff.) - denounced the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a text belonging to late antiquity, considering it a Christian forgery. About Hermes Trismegistus, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* translation, see Frances A. Yates (1995, pp. 13-31).

²⁶ In this regard, it should be noted that Camillo's interest in the structure of the Roman theater proposed in Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, with the reworking he proposes, anticipates – and may even have been an effective influence – Daniele Barbaro's commentary on Vitruvius (1556) and the construction of Andrea Palladio's Olympic Theater in Vicenza (1580), based on the Roman architect's own studies.

But, in addition to the seven vertical sections, the theater was also divided horizontally, from bottom to top, into seven “degrees”. Vitruvius also said that the seats in the auditorium should be divided into seven levels. Thus, the intersection of the seven vertical sections and the seven “degrees” resulted in a total of 49 main “places” (*loci*), where the fundamental images used in the Theater would be placed. With its seven degrees, ascending in descending order of importance, the *Theater* sought to present us with the universe expanding from its first causes through the different stages of the creation of the world: a process that began in the divine and then manifested itself in nature, in man, and in what he produces in the world.

In summary, in Camillo's *Theater*, the succession of degrees and their designation, as well as their respective contents and meanings, were presented as follows:

1st degree – *The seven planets*. It should contain the representation of the divine foundations of unity and traditions relating to the gods. The seven planets, which are the seven Governors of Heaven that surround the perceptible world with their circles, according to Hermes Trismegistus (*Pimander I*). In this degree, the most important one, Camillo, as indicated in *L'Idea del Theathro*, excludes the planet Sun, placing it in the 2nd degree and replacing it with the image of the *banquet*.

2nd degree – *The banquet*. Invoking Homer and the philosopher Plotinus, among others, Camillo presents the Ocean inviting all his gods to a banquet. It should symbolically represent the ‘water of wisdom’ where ideas, the primordial elements, are formed.

3rd degree – *The cave*. Camillo invokes Homer instead of Plato's cave. The elements are represented from the point of view of the natural world and their multiple combinations.

4th degree – *The Gorgons*. Camillo fuses several myths to represent the three souls of man (each with its own particular name), the dimension of the ‘inner man’.

5th degree – *Pasiphaë*. The myth of Pasiphaë in love with the bull symbolizes the descent of the soul into the body. It represents the ‘outer man’ in his physical dimension, encompassing the limbs of the body according to the nature of each planet.

6° grau – *I talari*. The winged sandals that Mercury adorns himself with to fulfill the wishes of the gods symbolize man's natural actions, those he is capable of performing without resorting to any instruments or techniques.

7th degree – *Prometheus*. Based on the myth of Prometheus, in this last degree Camillo represents all the arts and sciences (both noble and base) and their respective creations, not because they are of little importance but, as he says, for chronological reasons, since they were the last to be discovered by man.

The basic images of the *Theater* would then be those of the planetary gods (Diana, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn). The detailed organization of the images—and also writings, which we will discuss later—in the semicircular space before the spectator was designed to create a kind of “microcosm”, alluding to the structure of the Universe. The images were allegorical, 49 symbols representing general concepts, to be considered more or less like the letters of an alphabet, which could be combined in a variety of ways to form and express any type of concept. But we must also take into account, on this last point, that the same image could be used in different places, its meaning varying according to the degree to which it was placed.²⁷

It is also worth noting Camillo's explicit (and convenient) reference, in his description of the first degree, to the Lord's Prayer – *Holy Bible, New Testament*, “The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew” [6:9-13] – following a medieval tradition that emphasized the presence of the number seven in it: there are seven petitions addressed to God. In this passage, Camillo points out that the Hebrew text of the prayer written by St. Matthew consists of forty-nine words, emphasizing that this number is the “number of remission”, that is, he intends to demonstrate that his *Theater* is based on a Christian foundation, becoming a guide for the path through which anyone can purify their sins and attain elevation to God. This ‘secret’ of his theater is also revealed in his short work *De Transmutatione*.

His memory system – which shows an obsession with the number 7, the magic number on which all his analyses are based – was, he believed, based on the archetypes of reality, on which the other, secondary images concerning the whole of nature and man depended. But, although his vision is essentially Platonic, he associates it with hermetic and cabalistic elements, derived largely from the works of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola (1463-94). The latter, it must be said, opened a new chapter in the history of Renaissance magic, because although he began his philosophical career under the

²⁷ Precisely with regard to these 49 images, or symbols, it is worth comparing the printed version of *L'Idea del Theatro* with the manuscript *Theatro della Sapientia*, as Lina Bolzoni (2006, p. 30) points out, because, while in *L'Idea* the description is very general the manuscript traces a complex structure for each square on the board.

influence of Ficino, who was older than him, he was the one who introduced the use of Kabbalistic magic, or *practical Kabbalah* (as a complement to the so-called *magia naturalis*, defended by Ficino), whose influence is evident in Giulio Camillo, and even more so in Giordano Bruno.

Camillo also spoke to us about the Kabbalists' doctrine of the three worlds, according to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's version – the supercelestial world of the Sephiroth²⁸, the intermediate celestial world of the stars and the subcelestial elemental or natural world – because for him it is the correspondence that exists “...between the seven planetary measures of the celestial world and the supracelestial Sephiroth, which causes the Theater to extend to the supracelestial world, to the abyss of divine wisdom and the mysteries of Solomon's Temple.” (Yates, 2005, p. 172, own translation)

Camillo also added seven angels to the planets. The system of correspondences used in his *Theater* – between the planets, the Sephiroth (which here correspond to Platonic *Ideas*), and the angels – is, in general terms, that established in the Kabbalistic tradition by the *Zohar*. It is also from this latter work that he takes a quotation stating that man has three souls, which he expressed through the image of the Gorgon sisters (Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa), with only one eye for the three²⁹, which was the guiding image of the 4th degree of the *Theater* concerning the “inner man”.

Camillo also arrived at a new interpretation of the memory of “things” and “words”, placing books – probably by authors such as Virgil, Petrarch, or Dante – and boxes with written texts, in scrolls, under images representing scenes of deities and pagan heroes. The boxes would contain speeches by Cicero, according to Viglius' description, because

²⁸ The mystical tradition of Kabbalah (from the Hebrew *qabbalah*, meaning ‘tradition’), believed to be the result of a secret divine revelation supposedly communicated by Moses himself, emerged in the Middle Ages and is deeply rooted in the Hebrew world, having been transmitted orally over the centuries. The book *Zohar* (or *Book of Splendor*), consisting of a commentary on the Pentateuch, is its main source. The influence of this work of Jewish mysticism has been considerable, and its authorship is generally attributed to Moses de León (c. 1240-1305). The doctrine of the Sephiroth is contained in another important text of this mystical tradition, the *Sefer Yetzirah* (or *Book of Creation*), attributed to the patriarch Abraham. The *Tree of Sephiroth* (or *Tree of Life*) lies at the heart of Kabbalah and is its most representative and multifaceted symbol. The *Sefirot* are the ten primordial numbers. Combined with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, they represent the plan of creation of all things superior and inferior. They are the ten names, attributes, or emanations of God that express his essence and form the “mystical face of God” or the “body of the universe”. For an extensive analysis of the *Tree of Sephiroth*, see Manly P. Hall (2020, pp. 42–52).

²⁹ Here, we would like to draw your attention to a particular point. As noted in the Spanish edition of *La Idea del teatro* (op. cit., pp. 230–231, note 39), in reality Camillo creates a unique fusion of various myths here. The three sisters in the myth who have only one eye are the Graeae, who are also sisters of the Gorgons. Camillo has superimposed the two myths due to the close links that tradition created between the Graeae and the Gorgons, but also, probably, due to a further suggestion related to the myth of Perseus.

the Theater's memory system was intended, among other things, to memorize all the concepts that could be found in his works. In this respect, the *Theater* thus shows a certain return of the art of memory to its classical position as part of rhetoric, reestablishing the ancient link between wisdom and eloquence. It seems to be these boxes with texts that Camillo refers to on several occasions in *L'Idea del Theathro*, such as when he speaks in the second degree of the Greek god Proteus, next to whose representation there would be a "canon" inside which there would be "a volume ordered by sections."³⁰

These texts may have been stolen after Camillo's death. At least, that was the accusation made against Alessandro Citolini (friend and disciple of Camillo), author of the work *Tipocosmia*, published in Venice in 1561. Whether stolen or "appropriated", the aforementioned work does seem to have some connection to Camillo's *Theater*, although it can be considered, in the opinion of Frances Yates (2005, p. 265, own translation), "...an orderly and encyclopedic exposition of subjects and themes – for that is what *Tipocosmia* is – but without images, since there are no images or descriptions of images in *Tipocosmia*."³¹

When questioned by Viglius about the meaning of the work, Camillo "...spoke of it, saying that it represented everything the mind can conceive and everything that is hidden in the soul – all of which can be perceived at a single glance by examining the images." (Yates, pp.181-182, own translation)

Unlike his scholastic predecessors from the Middle Ages, and their followers, who had favored mainly mnemonic learning through the pure repetition of prayers, virtues, and lists of mental objects, restricting the imagination, and reducing the respective *ars memoriae* to a somewhat mechanical knowledge, Camillo, through an associative combination of the division of knowledge, emblematically codified, triumphantly brings back the *imagines agentes*, reviving their true function: the stimulation of the imagination through their *action*.

Corrado Bologna considers it highly probable that St. Ignatius of Loyola (Azheitia, 1491-Rome, 1556) was familiar with Camillo's work, with which he would have come

³⁰ Regarding the aforementioned passage (Camillo, 2006, p. 82), and others in which the word "canon" is used, the following hypothesis is put forward in a note in the Spanish edition (*idem*, p. 219, note 47, own translation): "It is not clear what 'canon' means - here and in other similar texts. It seems to indicate the list of arguments presented in each image. 'Volume ordered by sections' probably indicates a volume whose margins are cut and marked in such a way as to facilitate the search for the arguments contained in the pages (something similar to modern rubrics for addresses and telephone numbers)."

³¹ Also about Citolini, see Lina Bolzoni (2007, p. 253).

into contact in Paris in the years 1528-35, that is, during the period when he wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* – published only in 1548, after being examined by the Inquisition and receiving the necessary authorization – and having read (as reliable documents prove) the Venetian manuscript about ten years later (i.e., before its publication). We thus have that the founder of the Society of Jesus, whom Pope Pius XI declared in 1922 to be the “Patron of all Spiritual Exercises,” seems to have been interested in, if not influenced by, the ideas of Camillo.³²

His memory images were no longer just a way to remember better, but a medium that facilitated better concentration for the benefit of empathetic spiritual recollection, because with Camillo what is truly at stake is no longer simply the retrieval of information through a more or less functional organization, facilitating the evocation of places in memory, but a much more ambitious goal, which we may well consider a fantasy of omnipotence, and a superlative test of man's limits: he aspired to nothing less than to encompass the total sum of knowledge existing in the world and make it available to one person; a titanic challenge that the “divine” Camillo took on – implicit was the idea that man is a divine spark, a necessary condition for the microcosm and macrocosm to be interchangeable – certainly worthy of the king who sponsored it.

In fact, today we only have a vague idea of how his complex universal Theater would actually work through subtle arts (as if by magic), it must be said, because Camillo transformed the ancient art of memory into a occult art. He was, like Marsilio Ficino before him, a Christian hermeticist who attempted to reconcile hermetic teachings with Christianity – yet still did not escape being accused of being a magician – a typical scholar and member of the Venetian Academies of the early 16th century, where he enjoyed considerable prestige. After absorbing Florentine influences, these academies adopted their own characteristic forms, one of the most common being Ciceronian oratory. Camillo himself was an orator and admirer of Cardinal Bembo, the “champion” of the *Ciceronians* in Rome.³³

³² Cf. Corrado Bologna (2002, p. 113).

³³ The dominant literary movement in Rome in the early 16th century was Ciceronianism, characterized by an obsession with *style*, of which Pietro Bembo had become the leading figure – hence it was also often referred to as *Bembism*. In contrast to another movement that cultivated the use of the vernacular – but was also concerned with style – and for whom Petrarch was the ideal, the *Ciceronianists* were interested in the notions of good style expounded in the works of Latin rhetorical literature, concerned with elevating the vernacular to a higher level of Latinism through greater richness of ornamentation, abundance of vocabulary, and figures of speech.

Camillo collaborated with important contemporary artists to design and produce the images featured in his *Theater*. This was the case with Titian, who we know for certain today illustrated a copy of *L'Idea del Theathro* with 201 watercolors. The book belonged to the humanist Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, who took it to Spain. Unfortunately, this valuable copy was destroyed in the fire at El Escorial in 1671. Despite what happened, we are left today with the well-known painting *Allegory of Time Governed by Prudence* (1565), [see figure 4], which the Venetian master painted about twenty years after Camillo's death. This painting, as has been observed by several authors, allows us to glimpse how he interpreted the allegorical images conceived for use in the *Theater*, in this case the virtue of Prudence (memory, intelligence, providence).

Figure 4 – Titian, *Allegory of Time Governed by Prudence* (1565).



Source: http://www.symbolon.com/img/presseinformationen/Titiano_vecellio.jpg

Indeed, when we look at this work by Titian in which he portrayed himself as representing the past, his son Orazio Vecelli as representing the present, and his “adopted” grandson Marco Vecelli³⁴ as representing the future – we cannot help but recall what Camillo tells us in his description of the contents of the third level (The cave):

The three heads, those of the wolf, the lion, and the dog, are as follows. Macrobius writes that the ancients, wishing to represent the three times, that is, the past, the present, and the future, depicted the three heads mentioned. The wolf symbolized the past because it has already devoured it; the lion symbolized the present—if the present can exist—because present concerns cause us as much terror as seeing a lion would if it happened to us. And the dog symbolized the future because, like a docile dog, the future always promises us the best. (...) The same image of the three heads will mean in Pasiphae that man is subject to time.

³⁴ In reality, he was not Titian's grandson, but a distant relative whom Titian had taken into his home and taught the art; in any case, it seems that Titian had a particular affection for him. See Erwin Panofsky's essay “Titian's ‘Allegory of Prudence’: A Post Scriptum” (Panofsky, 1989, p. 109).

And in the winged sandals, all actions related to time that are not calculated by the distance or proximity of the Sun or by the course of the Moon, such as delaying, entertaining, ending, or postponing. (Camillo, 2006, pp. 122-124, own translation)

The Florentine Mannerist painter Francesco de' Rossi, known as *Salviati* (also known as *Cecchino del Salviati*), a close friend of Lodovico Domenichi – who even dedicated to him his Italian translation of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura*, published in Venice in 1547 –, and who between 1556 and 1557 worked at the Château de Dampierre for Jean Du Bellay, Cardinal of Lorraine, a great admirer and protector of Camillo, may have illustrated another copy of the same work during one of Camillo's stays in Rome. It would be interesting to see how this great fresco painter, a disciple of Andrea del Sarto and one of the greatest draftsmen of his time, specializing in elaborate, erudite compositions with many figures, who illustrated several works by men of letters and scholars in his circle, interpreted Camillo's allegories. But, once again, all we have left is the memory of it, because it has not survived to the present day, or its trail has been lost.

Indeed, this was believed for a long time – and is still asserted by Lina Bolzoni in the introduction to the Spanish edition of *L'Idea del Theatro*, already cited by us – to which Vasari, a friend of Salviati, contributed greatly. In his *Lives*, considered the only source on this subject, he mentions this fact with a certain degree of ambiguity and imprecision, especially with regard to dates.

However, several years ago, French historian Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa, in a detailed and careful essay, compared the possible dates for such a realization, examining Camillo's biography and analyzing the known data about his stays in France and Rome, and his contacts with Salviati, concluding that it was highly unlikely that this was *L'Idea del Theatro*.³⁵

Salviati, according to the hypothesis put forward by Deswarte-Rosa, which deserves at least some consideration, would have previously collaborated on another manuscript by Camillo, *Le Sette Difese del Teatro*. This collaboration, in his view, would

³⁵ See Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa (2001). As this researcher points out, who also rules out the possibility that it is an earlier version, Vasari's reference to Camillo's commission in *The Life* of Salviati is part of a series of precise and easily datable historical events, between the election of Pope Paul III and the painter's departure for Florence, to which he directly refers to several works and commissions by the artist. However, when Vasari interrupts the historical sequence of events to refer to the illustration in Camillo's manuscript—placing it between two specific dates, the year 1535, which he mistakenly identifies as the year of Charles V's triumphal entry into Rome (which took place in April 1536), and the year 1538 (the year Salviati completed the painting of the *Annunciation*) – he does not establish any clear link to a specific historical moment, unlike what he does when referring to the other works listed.

have taken place around 1534-1535, that is, around the time when the *Theater* intended for the exclusive teaching of Francis I was being built in Paris. Camillo would therefore not need to dedicate a written work on the subject to the French monarch, especially since, as mentioned, he had undertaken not to divulge his secret in any way. According to her, contrary to what is usually stated by art historians (taking the two dates indicated by Vasari as a reference), Salviati could never have illustrated *L'Idea del Theathro*. The reason is simple and logical: how could he have illustrated in Rome in the 1530s a manuscript dictated in Milan in January 1544?

However, Camillo's relationships with artists of his time, in the context of the planned *Theater*, may not have been limited to those we have already mentioned. The boldest hypothesis, and the one that, if proven, would have the most consequences, is put forward by Corrado Bologna, who believes it is quite possible that these relationships covered a much broader and more ambitious scope³⁶. Thus, according to this researcher, Camillo may have been, in some way, behind the sophisticated iconological program of the famous *Francis I Gallery* at the *Château de Fontainebleau*, which the French monarch subjected to a complete transformation in line with his ambition to make it the center of French cultural life, at an important moment in the Mannerist whirlwind in Italian and French painting. For Bologna, there is a close connection, and even an identity of design – “impressive”, in his words – between the conception of Gallery, which can be recognized as having been constructed according to a hermetic-allegorical structure, and that of Camillo's *Theater*.³⁷

Many of the references to the imaginary that we find in the *Theater* are obscure to our contemporary eyes. Camillo uses a language based on the art and mythology of the Greco-Roman pantheon, as well as references to biblical, Kabbalistic, and classical sources, such as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, but at the same time, his thinking is strongly

³⁶ In his article, however, the author prudently draws attention to the documentary verification efforts still to be completed in the ongoing research, announcing that the necessary evidence will be provided upon publication of his critical and annotated edition of the manuscript *Theatro della Sapiientia*, for the publisher Adelphi in Milan.

³⁷ Bologna does, however, provide a great deal of detailed and useful information, which we unfortunately cannot expand on due to lack of space. The Italian researcher's hypothesis has at least the advantage, if he is correct, of providing a more plausible explanation for the huge payments received by Camillo from the French monarch in 1533-34, shortly before work began on painting the Gallery: this funding was not intended solely to remunerate his lessons to Francis I – in Italian language and mnemonics (including the development of the *Theater*, both in the form of an amphitheater and as a book) – as has been thought to this day, but, as suggested, we would have to admit that it was also intended to reward him for his conception, parallel to and strongly influenced by his theater, of the iconographic project for the allegorical gallery at Fontainebleau.

grounded in certain scientific principles related to the Renaissance astronomical theories of his time. Thus, as noted by sculptor and researcher of the Venetian academic's work Kate Robinson,

Useful comparisons can be made between Camillo's *L'idea* and astronomical treatises such as the celebrated *Sphera* of Sacro Bosco (composed during the thirteenth century and used up till the seventeenth), Pontano's *De Rebus Coelestibus* (Venice, 1519) and the great polish astronomer Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*, which had been published in Nuremberg in 1543, a matter of months before Camillo dictated *L'idea* to Muzio. (Robinson, 2003, w. p. n.)³⁸

Interestingly, after an “eclipse” of several centuries following his death, during which he was almost forgotten except for a few scattered references, and an inauspicious start to the 20th century³⁹, today Camillo's work has been inspiring artists from various disciplines, as we will analyze below. The resurgence of interest and the recognition he is once again receiving is due to the fact that his ambitious undertaking, carried out according to principles that may seem unclear today but were not arbitrary, is now considered a fundamental precursor of a synchronic, non-linear way of thinking, rather than a diachronic one – unlike the project that became the main objective of the French philosophers Diderot and D'Alembert in the 18th century, the *Encyclopédie*, arranged alphabetically in a linear fashion – that is, it closely resembles the structure of what we now call *hypertext*.

ANCIENT MNEMONIC SYSTEMS AS A REFERENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTWOKS

The ancient mnemonic systems of artificial memory have also served as inspiration for contemporary works of art. In fact, since the mid-1980s, there has been a resurgence of interest in ancient models of spatial memorization from *ars memoriae* – particularly Giulio Camillo's *Theater of Memory* – which had been abandoned and forgotten (for the

³⁸ The same author (*idem*) adds: “It is significant that both Camillo and Copernicus worked or studied at the Universities of Bologna and at Padua, a greenhouse for new astronomical ideas. Even if they were not personally acquainted, they would have been aware of a common parlance. On a broad level, there are correspondences in terms of some of Copernicus's and Camillo's influences, the Pythagoreans and Trismegistus, for example.”

³⁹ As we can see, for example, in the opinion of the erudite Viennese historian Julius Schlosser, who left (brief) comments that were not very flattering about him, demonstrating an obvious misunderstanding of his ideas. See Julius Schlosser (1993, pp. 219-220).

reasons we have pointed out) since the 17th century, the century of the Baroque. It took on, in general, but not exclusively, the form of installations in various configurations. An important, though not exclusive, part of this renewed interest seems to have resulted from the “computer age”, with digital technological developments and their potential applications, as well as the resulting reflections, emphasizing the exploration of our minds. This is because there are those who recognize “...the digital environment much more as a universe that relates to the human mind than as part of the concrete world. The next step will therefore be to pay special attention to the functioning of memory (...) the spatial representation of the memorization process.” (Pratschke and Tramontano, 2005, p. 4, own translation)

This has been the case with some artists who have dedicated themselves to the development of “immersive environments” – but not only that, as we shall see – who have revived this very ancient *Art* with a renewed approach. The interest in recovering these ancient spatial mnemonic systems has focused on spatial structuring for the construction of mental models and learning spaces.

In fact, Giulio Camillo's *Theatre* project, with its claim to universal knowledge, has been hailed as a historical precursor to the development of the virtual interface – the reference to the *structural* affinity between his ideas and the digital theatre of memory is now commonplace – as well as to the notions of the modern museum and the Internet. As we can read in a much-cited article by Peter Matussek,

It was only in the computer age that Camillo's name reappeared out of oblivion – at first sporadically in a few specialised articles in the fifties, then with increasing enthusiasm, until Camillo became a real hero of books and congresses, and even of television programmes and Internet appearances. (Matussek, 2001, p. 1)⁴⁰

Also according to Matussek, the renewed attention given to Camillo is not unrelated to the success achieved by the work of Frances A. Yates, to which we have often referred throughout this article, which has contributed greatly to this resurgence or, if you will, to his posthumous glory⁴¹. And in Yates we already find a hypothesis, later supported by other theorists:

⁴⁰ The television programme Matussek refers to is a film made by Lina Bolzoni for Italian television: *Il Teatro della Memoria* (1990).

⁴¹ See Peter Matussek (2001, pp. 1-2). And there is a strong probability, according to Matussek (*op. cit.*, p. 14), that the *Human Interface Guidelines*, developed by Apple's Human Interface Group during the 1980s

[...] a much bolder hypothesis which she advanced only in a cautious aside: the essential connection between this Renaissance scholar's combinational data construction and the operation of today's digital calculator. This hypothesis met with general approval. Umberto Eco labelled Camillo as a cabbalistic programmer, Lina Bolzoni called his data construction the "ultimate computer", Harmut Winkler derived an entire media theory from "L'Idea del Teatro" and Stephen Boyd Davis considered it to be the historical forerunner of the design of a virtual reality. (Matussek, 2001, pp. 2-3)

PABLO HELGUERA

Pablo Helguera (born 1971, in Mexico City) is a Mexican artist based in New York, where he worked for about 15 years in American cultural institutions as a cultural promoter and educator, notably as Director of Educational Programming at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1998–2005)⁴². Helguera is a multidisciplinary artist who has used a wide variety of materials and media, and has sometimes resorted to unusual media to present his works, not without a touch of irony, such as imaginary symposiums, phonograph recordings, audio guides for exhibitions, or nomadic museums (he is the founder of the *Escuela Panamericana del Desasosiego* project in this field), based on historical research or concerns related to the very nature of art, perception, or the role that culture plays in politics and society. His work has been exhibited in important institutions as well as in various international biennials. He is also the author of interesting reflections on *the role of art after September 11, 2001*.

In this article, we are particularly interested in his modern installation *Memory Theater*. We have chosen to begin with this piece because, unlike those of other artists we will discuss, it does not use any electronic or digital resources in its presentation. To create it, Pablo Helguera took Giulio Camillo's *Theater of Memory* as his starting point, with a clear intention:

(Apple Computer Inc., *Human Interface Guidelines: the Apple Desktop Interface*, Reading (Mass.), 1987), closely followed, to say the least, the traditional teachings of *ars memoriae* contained in treatises on rhetoric. Matussek provides a brief but interesting analysis of the *Human Interface Guidelines*, comparing the concepts and keywords found therein with those of the treatise *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, highlighting some analogies that seem obvious to him.

⁴² As a museum professional, he has also worked at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where he organized educational and performance programs. He was co-director of the Contemporary Art Experts Forum at ARCO, Madrid, in 2003. In 2006, he published the book *Manual de Estilo del arte contemporáneo* (Mexico City: Tumbona Ediciones, Anómalos collection), which is presented, with irony, as an essential guide for those interested in playing the game of the art world.

Through this project, I seek to submit the notion that Camillo's Theater of Memory marks the physical beginning of the encyclopaedic museum, and that the ancient art of memory and its formulation of artificial memory establishes the conceptual origin of the museum and the subsequent virtual art space. (Helguera, 2004, w. p. n.).

Based on the idea inherent in Camillo's original *Theater*, which attempted to represent all knowledge in a systematic, interrelated order, working in collaboration with community and student groups – in this version (2004), images of which we present here [figures 5 and 6], students from Banff Community High School – sought to identify the specific icons of the community, of our “universal” knowledge. The 49 icons used, as in Camillo's project, were chosen together with the students. The first recreation of this Theater, to our knowledge, was carried out at the University of Montana, USA, in 2001. To this end, a questionnaire was distributed to a group of students, asking them to indicate the images that they felt best represented the ideas conveyed through G. Camillo's original symbols (love, hate, marriage, beauty, etc.). Then, the images were searched for in a Google database and subsequently printed in the reconstructed Theater.

This method of choosing the images used can be better understood if we take into account the following clarification by the artist regarding Camillo's original symbols:

Camillo's images were taken from biblical, mythological and occult texts, and most of them would not be representative of any particular idea to a contemporary audience. However, his classification method is still valid and functions well when adapted to our contemporary cosmogony of images. Memory Theater is a concrete attempt to re-encounter the value of certain utopias of knowledge that were discarded due to their ingenuity or scientific imprecision. (Helguera, *idem*)

The result achieved seems to us, as far as we can tell from the images we have seen, in the absence of direct contact with the installation, to reveal an intention to try to remain close to the description we have of the original model – the one we know through Viglius, to which we have already referred – whose structure follows directly (in a simplified way) through its levels, enhanced by its wooden construction and scale. It thus differs from other installations by other artists, who have also taken Camillo's *Theater* as a reference.

Thus, according to the artist's own statement,

(...) the project is also an experiment that seeks to recover the immediacy of senses in the experience of learning, which has occurred with the emergence of the information revolution. In a certain way Memory Theater can be described as the first post- virtual site as it operates in a similar way to a contemporary Website, but in a physical manner and stressing individual interaction. With this in mind, Memory Theater seeks to investigate notions of collective imagery through collaborations with various groups of students. (Helguera, *ibidem*)

In addition to this installation, Helguera also highlighted a theory of creativity based on the *Art of Memory*, rooted in a combination of cognitive theories, phenomenological discourse, and hermetic thinking, in an 80-page book that was one of the works exhibited at his *Swan Song* exhibition (2005, Julia Friedman Gallery, New York). The works presented implemented various aspects of these ideas, addressing themes such as the relationship between architecture and memory (the connection between *ars memoriae* and spatialities has been an ever-present issue since its inception, as we have seen)

Figures 5 and 6 – Pablo Helguera, *Memory Theater* (2004). Installation, general view and detail.



Source: <http://databaseimaginary.banff.org/>

Pablo Helguera is particularly interested in the relationships between history and cultural heritage, cultural production, and language. This is evident in his work *Conservatory of Dead Languages*, presented in the same exhibition, which is an installation of recordings on wax cylinders (reminiscent of Plato's metaphor in the dialogue *Theaetetus*) of languages in danger of extinction:

(...) Using an also near-extinct device, Thomas Alva Edison's wax cylinder phonograph, the artist has recorded a variety of songs and texts of languages that will likely disappear in the next half century. By creating a group of obsolete recordings of a dying language, Helguera points to the ironies, contradictions, and mythologies of the notion of preservation.”(Julia Friedman Gallery, 2005)

We conclude with one last reference: we also know that as a performer (he has given several solo presentations over the years), he gave a *performance* in 1995 dedicated to the mnemonic system of the *Palace of Memory*, created by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci⁴³.

ANNE & PATRICK POIRIER

Given the concerns that have always guided this artistic couple – true “masters of ruins”, to use Günter Metken's (1994, p. 29) apt expression – throughout their career, which has been dominated by the theme of memory and the survival of ancient forms, it is not surprising to find that they too have taken an interest in some of their works in the remote mnemonic systems of artificial memory. In fact, as early as 1978, in relation to their famous work *Domus Aurea* (1976-77) – which we will not discuss in this article – they made a comment in which they explicitly referred to the ancient mnemonic arts: “We perceived the Domus Aurea in its true form, as a mental architecture, as a metaphor for the brain, for the unconscious.” (A. & P. Poirier *apud* Foray, 1994, pp. 43-44)⁴⁴

⁴³ Matteo Ricci (born in Macerata, Italy, 1552-1610, Beijing) was the author in 1596 of a well-known mnemonic treatise, which is unique in that it was written in Chinese: *Jifa* (*Treatise on Mnemonic Arts*). Ricci became a novice of the Society of Jesus in 1571, and after his theological (and also humanistic—which included classes in rhetoric and ethics—and scientific) training at the Jesuit college in Florence (1572/73) and then at the Faculty of Arts of the Jesuit college in Rome, he was sent in 1578 as a missionary to the East, spending five years in India and Macau before arriving in China in 1583, where he fought against Pythagoras' doctrine of the transmigration of souls as part of a more general attack on Buddhism. By 1595, he had already mastered the Chinese language with some fluency when he moved to Nanchang, the administrative and commercial center of Jiangxi province. At the end of that year, he wrote a book of maxims on the theme of friendship in Chinese characters, drawn from various classical authors and the fathers of the Catholic Church. It was around this time that he began to discuss his theories on memory with some local Chinese scholars, while also teaching mnemonic techniques. It was as a reflection of this experience that he wrote his short treatise, in which he describes the palace of memory he built for this purpose, which was offered to the governor of Jiangxi, Lu Wangai, and his three sons. The most important aspect of *Jifa*, which we must emphasize, is that Ricci conceived his short treatise from the outset as yet another means of converting the Chinese to Christianity (without success); in fact, he hoped to impress the Chinese with his memorization skills, arousing their curiosity about his culture, which he thought would be followed by the need to question him about the religion that had made such wonders possible. About Matteo Ricci and his treatise, see Jonathan D. Spence (2002.).

⁴⁴The original statement it is included in *ANNE et Patrick Poirier, Domus Aurea*. Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1978, p. 59. Jean-Michel Foray interprets this comment as an explicit reference to Giulio Camillo's Theater. However, this is not our opinion.

Memoria artificiosa

Two works with the same title date from 1990, a sculpture and an installation – let us call them that for convenience, and for the sake of artistic terminology, because they are much more than that – both of which refer, as the title clearly indicates, to what we call artificial memory. Both highlight a procedure that the Poirier couple adopted early on: placing architecture and the brain on the same plane, representing the distribution of memory in space, or rather, in their case, in the shape of the skull itself, whose (cranial) box – or, in architectural terms, *calotte* – simultaneously symbolizes the world. This is therefore a clear approximation to the ancient mnemonic arts, particularly the hermetic-kabbalistic aspect, which other elements present in the works clarify.

These works stem from the ‘mental thing’, as they explicitly wrote in their *Journal de l'architecte*, regarding the basic form that gave rise to them:

[...] And no doubt none of my constructions will ever see the light of day, perhaps existing only within the narrow and confining confines of a skull. Recently, by the way, I have been amused by the idea of turning the ivory dome that contains our brain into the very shape of my dreams: I have imagined a number of architectural structures, all based on the same basic shape, a perfect ellipse, whose curves I calculated from a photograph of a human brain. These architectural designs, of which I have made a few simplified models, are impossible attempts to organize physical spaces that correspond to mental spaces. [...] ⁴⁵ (ANNE et Patrick Poirier, p.116, own translation)

It is indeed the shape of a severed skull, made of bone, that tops the sculpture. The interior space of the skull is filled with a white architectural model [see figure 7], which, as stated in the *above* testimony, is based on a perfect ellipse based on a photograph of the human brain. The internal spatial subdivision of the model closely follows the floor plan presented here [see figure 8], and is similar, in general terms, to that found, on a much larger scale, inside the piece that constitutes the installation – the difference in the latter, also white in color, lies in the addition of new divisions, both laterally and at the top, as well as in the central part, while maintaining the shape of the ellipse.

The model of the installation is more complex and, visually, resembles the idea we have of a small town, organized around amphitheatres placed in the center. The model of the installation also makes the “access doors” much more evident – the door of Mnemosyne, the door of Lethé, the door of Cronos, the door of Eros, etc. – and the “access

⁴⁵ Anne & Patrick Poirier, “Extrait du *Journal de l'architecte*, fragment, 6 janvier”.

routes” – access route to the intuitive sector, access route to the intellectual sector, access route to the sensory sector, access route to the emotional sector – outlined in the floor plan (incidentally, the “access routes” do not exist in the model of the sculpture).

Figures 7 and 8 - Anne & Patrick Poirier, *Memoria artificiosa* (1990). Model inside the skull, bone. General outline of the architecture inside the skull.



Source: ANNE et Patrick Poirier (1994).

The simple mention of “access doors” and “access routes” allows us to highlight that we are dealing with what we might call a *sapiential scheme* – which is why we do not call it a “plan”, because it is obviously not simply an architectural project – akin to those derived from the *Art of Memory*. The latter is evoked in the long sentence that serves as a “wall”, crossed by the “access routes”: *An elliptical enclosure whose curves are geometrically calculated based on the plan of a brain and enclosing a vast architectural complex functioning as an art of memory.* [own translation, see figure 8]

A brief examination of the planned spaces and compartments easily confirms what we have just said. The center is occupied by the “Theater of Dreams” and at its top, facing each other, are the amphitheatres of the “Theater of Memory” and the “Theater of Oblivion”. Surrounding this central part are the *Rooms and Sections*: ‘Room of Simulacra and Nothingness’, ‘Room of Inaccessible Anteriority’, ‘Room of Memory of the Infinite Future’, ‘Room of Memory of Infinite Spaces’, ‘Section of Memory of Sensations and Perceptions’, ‘Section of the Memory of Emotions and Passions’, ‘Section of the Memory of Abstractions and Knowledge’, and ‘Section of the Memory of Intuitions and Grace’.

The model underlying these works, which immediately springs to mind, is Camillo's *Theater of Memory*, and will be clearly assumed in another installation, quite similar to this one, which we will analyze briefly later on. In addition to the small model, the sculpture consists of a kind of vertical wooden piece of furniture [see figure 10], with a small drawer containing paper cards (we confess we do not know what they contain). From the piece that constitutes the installation – in the form of a horizontal wooden table, covered by a lid that opens upwards to reveal the model, reminding us of a grand piano – there are three large drawers containing project sketches relating to the model, other photographs, and a handwritten book. These drawers and their respective ‘papers’ [see figure 9] take the place of the boxes with written texts and books that we know existed in Giulio Camillo's *Theater*.

But if we can legitimately draw comparisons with Camillo's work, we must also recognize the updating carried out by the Poirier couple, visible in the way they arrange the “Rooms” and “Sections” in a specific order in their sapiential scheme. In fact, this closely follows the anatomy of the brain and its hemispheres, as Günter Metken rightly observed: “Here we find old cosmological representations updated by modern research on the brain, which has located the centers of speech, thought, and emotions.” (*idem*, pp. 29-30, own translation)

Figures 9 and 10 - Anne & Patrick Poirier, *Memoria artificiosa* (1990). Installation at the Ropac Gallery, Salzburg. Sycamore, paper, photographs, 250 x 200 x 90 cm. *Memoria artificiosa* (1990). Sculpture in sycamore, bone, paper, 120 x 20 x 20 cm



Source: ANNE et Patrick Poirier (1994).

Theater of Memory

In the installation *Theater of Memory* (1990), presented for the first time at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris, Anne and Patrick Poirier refer explicitly, as we mentioned earlier, to Giulio Camillo's *Theater*. Very similar in form to the installation *Memoria artificiosa*, although different in size, it also consists of a horizontal wooden table [see figure 11], covered by a lid that opens upwards to reveal a large white model. The internal spatial subdivision of this model, although also circumscribed by a perfect ellipse – following the procedure used in previous works – is, as can be easily seen, much simpler and does not follow the same scheme-plan used in those works.

In fact, it highlights yet another contrast between the large Vitruvian amphitheater, located at the top right, and the spaces of the small architectural nucleus at the top left, interspersed in the central area by an open space, which also functions as a kind of square and passageway [see figure 12], flanked by two architectural structures – their shapes are somewhat similar to sectioned conical pyramids, which remind us of the conical cenotaphs (funerary monuments) of the 18th-century French utopian architect Etienne-Louis Boullée – and which roughly resemble those that will appear in the models of his large-scale *Mnémosyne* project.

Figures 11 and 12 - Anne & Patrick Poirier, *Theater of Memory* (1990). Installation at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery, Paris. Sycamore, paper, photographs, 170 x 200 x 160 cm. Detail of the model and drawers.



Source: ANNE et Patrick Poirier (1994)

This time, only two large drawers come out of the horizontal table, one containing project sketches relating to the model, the other a book in which we can see a reddish photograph on the open pages (we assume that there are other images on the other pages) similar to others we know from his *Mnémosyne* project. These drawers and their contents remind us, once again, of the boxes with written texts and books that we know once existed in Giulio Camillo's *Theater*.

In fact, this installation and the works entitled *Memoria artificiosa* herald, and serve as preparation for, the next project: the much more ambitious and complex *Mnémosyne*, carried out between 1990 and 1993, related to Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*. The artist couple will take their attempt to awaken memories of cultural history even further and, at the same time, reactivate mental contexts and associations. The models and the *sapiential scheme* observable in the works we have just looked at give way to more complex ones, inviting us to explore the most recondite recesses of memory.

Mnémosyne

Finally, we now turn to the extensive *Mnemosyne* project, as presented at the retrospective exhibition at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna (February 5–April 5, 1994). It was developed during two distinct periods, 1990-1991 and 1992-1993, corresponding to two campaigns of “fouille” (here understood in the double sense of excavations/research), as they call them, and its main pieces, which can be considered the corollary of the entire project, are two enormous wooden models/constructions (700 x 550 x 30 cm, and 900 x 700 cm), one from 1991 [see figure 13] and the other from 1992. Both entitled *Mnemosyne*, they are vast architectural complexes, organized around an elliptical plan (the geometric shape of the skull), and are divided into two symmetrical parts, lengthwise, corresponding to the two cerebral hemispheres. Similar to the model of the installation *Memoria artificiosa*, the center of these is also occupied by three places for viewing images and creation, three buildings connected to each other: namely, in 1991, a “Theatre of Mnemosyne”, a “Theatre of Lethe”, and an amphitheater for “Images of Dream” and “Images of Creation”; and in the 1992 installation, a “Lieu de visualisation des Images de la Mémoire”, a “Lieu de visualisation des Images de l'Oubli”, and an amphitheater conceived as a “Lieu de mélange des images de la Mémoire et de L'Oubli, où se forment les images du Rêve et de la Création”.

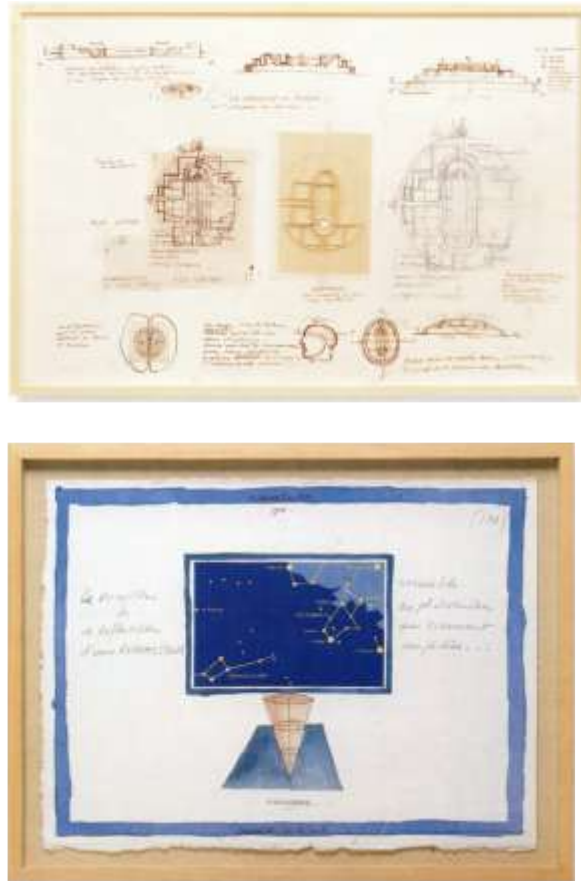
Surrounding this center are museums, libraries, observatories (in the 1991 model) – such as the ‘Observatory for Geometrical Perfection and Intuition of Cosmos’ or the one for ‘The Memory of Future and Forgotten Utopias’ –, conservatories (in the 1992 model) – such as the one entitled ‘Conservatoire des Geographies Celestes et des Cosmographies de L’ Univers Visible’ – or towers, such as the ‘Tower of Speculation’ and the ‘Tour des Vestiges de la Raison’, among other spaces and buildings. In addition, the “floor plans” of the models (much more complex than that of *Memoria artificiosa*, which makes it impossible to reproduce any of them here) indicate “access doors”. In the 1991 model, six are indicated, while in the 1992 model there are four: the ‘Porte de Chronos (Conscience, Ordre)’ and ‘Porte de Chaos (Inconscient, Desordre)’ are located at the top of the longitudinal axis; the ‘Porte de Thanatos’ and ‘Porte d'Eros’ are located on the central axis perpendicular to the amphitheater.

Figures 13 and 14 - Anne & Patrick Poirier, *Mnémosyne* (1991). Model construction, painted wood, 276 x 217 x 118 cm. *Mnémosyne, Les archives de l'archéologue* (1991). Sycamore, variable dimensions.



Source: ANNE et Patrick Poirier (1994)

Figures 14 and 15 - Anne & Patrick Poirier, *Mnémosyne, Les archives de l'architecte* (1991). Drawing, 75 x 110 cm. *Mnémosyne, Journal de l'archéologue*, 7 septembre, dix-huit heures (1991). Watercolor on paper.



Source: ANNE et Patrick Poirier (1994).

A diagram of the 1991 model also mentions 49 rooms, of which we will mention only the following as examples: ‘Salle des Fragments de la Memoire’; ‘Salle des Noms voués a L'Oubli’; ‘Salle des Images de L'Extase’; ‘Salle des Voix Oubliées’; ‘Salle des Representations de la Divinité’; ‘Salle des Dieux Oubliées’; ‘Salle des Peintures de la Passion’; ‘Salle des Images de la Melancolie’; ‘Salle des Architectures de la Memoire’; ‘Salle des Intuitions Cosmoginiques’; ‘Salle des Utopies Oubliées’; ‘Salle des Geographies Celestes’ and ‘Salle de la Memoire des Espaces Infinis’.

During the two phases of the project, the artist couple produced a huge collection of objects and graphic documents related to the specific contents of the buildings and spaces. The models are accompanied by numerous drawings and texts, floor plans [see figures 14 and 15], photographs, and diary books, grouped into collections – ‘Les archives de l’archéologue’, ‘Les archives de l’architecte’ and ‘Journal de l’archéologue’– and displayed framed on the walls or in ‘sculpture-furniture’ [see figure 14], designed especially for this purpose.

The authorship of these documents is attributed by the Poirier to an archaeologist-architect, a fictional narrator whose archives they took possession of:

Over the past few years, we have begun to assemble the archives left to us by a man whose identity is irrelevant here. This singular individual, with his dual personality as both architect and archaeologist, left us a chaotic mass of documents, photographs, fragments and relics of all kinds, complicated and often indecipherable plans and diagrams, and tiny or immense models. We have tried our best to classify this material, storing it, where possible, in display cases or drawer units. It seems that this character devoted himself entirely to the excavation and ideal reconstruction of a site he called MNEMOSYNE, a site which, despite our research, we have been unable to find on any known map of Memory or Utopia... Among other things, he left us his excavation notebooks, from which we present here a few excerpts that may shed some light on the meaning of his work. (ANNE et Patrick Poirier, p.127, own translation)⁴⁶

It is possible to establish a direct connection with Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*⁴⁷ based on the above quotation and the title of his project: with this, it will be even more evident that much of Poirier's work, like Warburg's, has long revolved around the idea of an immense imaginary library as an ideal metaphor for memory, as well as the skull, architecturally conceived as a kind of dome of knowledge. Of course, for them, Warburg's *Atlas*, as an archive of existing images, will be more related to the ancient “mnemonic devices” than to the modern archive device; more specifically, to the physical locations of the *theaters of memory*. And for the Poirier couple, memory and architecture are interconnected, to the point of conceiving a schematic architecture of memory:

⁴⁶ Anne & Patrick Poirier, “Extrait du *Journal de l'archéologue-architecte*”

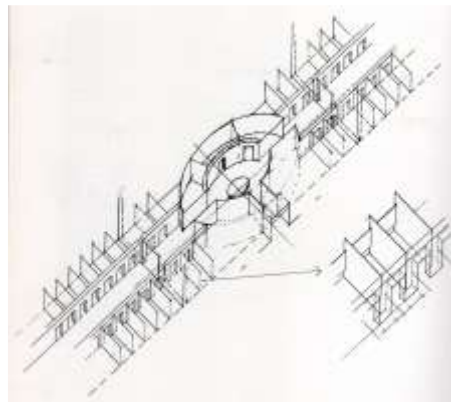
⁴⁷ We refer to the famous *Bilder-atlas Mnemosyne* by German art historian Aby Warburg (1866, Hamburg - Hamburg, 1929). Warburg began working on the project (which can be considered his magnum opus) in 1925, after being discharged from the Bellevue Sanatorium psychiatric clinic in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland (in 1924). He developed it systematically between 1928 and 1929, but it remained unfinished at the time of his death. The *Atlas* of memory—named after the Greek goddess, engraved on a plaque at the entrance to his library—consisted of a set of more than sixty movable panels, on which he had grouped around a thousand photographs from various sources, in which he sought to demonstrate the permanence of a heritage of certain expressive values (the inscription of humanity's emotional experiences) from the *ancient*. In reaction to the positivist notion of art history and its formalism, since it does not present it in a linear and chronological manner, but according to a synchronic arrangement, in which nothing comes before or after, but rather alongside each other—in addition to blurring the boundaries between the conventions of “high culture” and mass culture—what Warburg did with his *Atlas* was to rethink art history through an iconic archive articulated according to heterogeneities and discontinuities, in which he used a method of assembling images from different periods, through visual groupings independent of each other, which has been compared by various authors to certain experiments of the contemporary artistic avant-garde (especially those of the Russian constructivists): it reflects Warburg's theory of cultural memory, which he understood as a complex of processes of circulation of expressive forms. For a more detailed analysis, see George Didi-Huberman's extensive and remarkable essay (2011, pp. 11-220) for the exhibition catalog *Atlas¿, Cómo llevar el mundo a cuestas?*, which was on display at the Reina Sofia National Art Museum in Madrid (November 26, 2010/March 28, 2011)..

... Moreover, when I try to visualize my own inner self, I see it as a HUGE DESERTED ARCHITECTURE, which I myself have built, and which I have not yet finished exploring. This architecture contains gardens, courtyards, theaters, museums, libraries, necropolises, and countless other places that I have yet to discover. It seems to me that at each stage of my work, I discover a new place, I open a new room in this mental architecture. (...) The fragment written several years ago in my diary, which I found and reread the other day, coincides perfectly with my current and eternal obsession: how to understand and represent the infinite complexity of what constitutes us, what constitutes our being, that is, Memory. How does this organization with its infinite connections and secret underground networks function? My entire career as an architect has been devoted to this: attempting, through utopian models, to metaphorically represent the phenomena or spaces of our memory.[...] I am always reminded of the metaphor of a city, which must be both explored and built (...) like an architect trying to design the improbable utopia of an improbable city whose plan would be the brain [...]. (ANNE et Patrick Poirier, p.181, own translation)

In 1993, 63 panels from the *Mnemosyne Atlas* were presented at an exhibition at the Vienna Academy of Arts on Schillerplatz, conceived by the Dedalus group and with scenography designed by Anne & Patrick Poirier [see figure 16], which focused on the idea of the Hamburg library – the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek – with its oval reading room. The panels were mounted in as many small “cells”, alongside texts extracted from Warburg’s notes on the project. As Günter Metken points out,

The artists had a brilliant idea. They brought together the astrological collections in the model of the library, raised like a shrine, the house of Mnemosyne; on either side was a white cloister, where small cells had been set up to display the various plates. (...) The Poiriers had placed the cross-section of the model of the library in an ellipse and covered the back wall with notes from Aby Warburg’s estate. (Metken, *idem*, pp. 30-31, own translation)

Figure 16 - Anne & Patrick Poirier, plan for the exhibition *Mnemosyne*, Vienna, 1993.



Source: ANNE et Patrick Poirier (1994)

AURÉLIEN FROMENT

French multidisciplinary artist Aurélien Froment (b. 1976, Angers), known for works that explore the connection between learning processes and memory – such as the video *Théâtre de poche* (2007) or the installation *Who Here Listens to BBC News on Friday Night* (2008) – has conceived and produced the video *L’Idée de Camillo* (*Camillo’s Idea*) specifically for the exhibition *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* at the 55th Venice Biennale, in response to a request from Massimiliano Gioti, artistic director of the Biennale and curator of the exhibition. The video, presented as an installation in the Arsenale pavilion and lasting 25:04 min., is a kind of extension of a series of performances from 2009 entitled *Le Chiffre à la lettre* (*Code Countdown*), in which the artist had already, in a way, paid attention to the mnemonic arts.

In *L’Idée de Camillo*, the character of a mnemonist wanders through the spaces of the Olympic Theater in Vicenza (1579-1585) – designed by Andrea Palladio, based on the classical Vitruvian model – whether alongside Vincenzo Scamozzi's *trompe-l'oeil* scenery [see figure 17] or other interior spaces [see figure 18], while reciting from memory the history of *ars memoriae* from its origins in ancient Greece with Simonides, through subsequent developments such as the *Theater of Memory* of Camillo, a Venetian, it should be remembered – to which the title explicitly refers; hence the appropriate choice of a specific theater (incidentally, the oldest indoor theater in Europe) to set the narrative action – to much later contributions, such as that of the German monk Gregor von Feinaigle (1760–1819).

Figures 17 and 18 - Aurélien Froment, images from *L’Idée de Camillo* (2013).



Source: http://www.motivegallery.nl/?page_id=9760

Gregor von Feinaigle's best-known mnemonic work is *The New Art of Memory* (London, 1812). An obscure author today, Feinaigle is nevertheless sometimes cited as having developed a method for memorizing numbers, which consisted of replacing them with letter sounds (consonants). This helps us better understand the relationship between this video and the aforementioned performance *Le Chiffre à la lettre*, conceived as a monologue to be performed by an actor, and based on a previous interview with French magician Benoît Rosemont, in which he talks about magic and ingenious techniques for memorizing numbers. In the performance, Rosemont (through the actor) shares his tricks with the audience and reveals the methods of his older colleagues.

And because the video was commissioned for the aforementioned themed exhibition, which took its title and concept from the construction project (in 1955) of an encyclopedic palace in Washington, D.C. – never realized, conceived by the American artist Marino Auritti (virtually unknown) who, however, over the years built a model of a 136-story building – with the intention of encompassing *all* existing knowledge, we conclude with the following comment: we find it strange (to say the least) that Massimiliano Gioni, in the text of the official catalog in which he explains Auritti's project⁴⁸ and that of the exhibition he curated, never mentions the name of Giulio Camillo – a Venetian, we recall –, even when he refers to

[...] the dream of a universal, all-embracing knowledge crops up throughout the history of art and humanity, as one that eccentrics like Auritti share with many other artists, writers, scientists, and self-proclaimed prophets who have tried, often in vain, to fashion an image of the world that will capture its infinite variety and richness. (Gioni, 2013, p. 18)

⁴⁸ About Auritti's project, see *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico. Short guide* (2013, pp.36-37).

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