

## Form follows dysfunction 59

The multimedia mother of the muses by Gary Schwartz, 1999

One of my more grievous disappointments in life was the cancellation of a lecture I was invited to give about eight years ago to a group of software manufacturers. I had a wonderful title: Artificial memory before and after the printed book. At the time, pc people were still unsure about how to dish up DOS to the user. Should they stick with commands in words, the way DOS started, or move to icons in the style of Apple? Although I preferred commands, I was going to predict that the icons would win out. My prediction was based on the memory systems that were developed in classical antiquity and which flourished in the Renaissance.

In order to store information where it could be retrieved, a memory palace of spaces, images and emotions would be constructed. The palace could be imaginary, but it could also be a real structure. The rememberer would enter his palace, following a fixed path that would take him from room to room, past statues in terrifying or bizarre poses. Each statue was the guardian of one or more texts which the practitioner could retrieve at will. My feeling was that since this tried and true system considered images easier to remember than words, modern users too would prefer icons to commands. This is indeed what happened. Had the lecture gone through as planned, I would have earned the reputation of an i.t. prophet and would today be a highly paid adviser in a branch which is always badly in need of advice.

I had to think of this polarity last Saturday, at a presentation in Felix Meritis in Amsterdam by the American-German artist Arnold Dreyblatt of his *Memory Project*. In November, Dreyblatt is going to turn that magnificent building on the Keizersgracht into a memory palace. Visitors will be guided through its spaces, where they will find or retrieve texts of various kinds. Most of them are about people: 765 forgotten men and women from central Europe who were included in a Who's Who in 1933; a Hungarian Jewish spy who operated under 50 disguises and ended up as a Buddhist monk and scholar in Harbin, China; present-day participants who enter their own biographical information into Dreyblatt's growing archive. It also covers all the systems for archiving Dreyblatt has been able to document and the reports he has been gathering concerning catastrophes in archives. From what I saw, I am convinced that in one basic way it will certainly work: no one who participates in this project is likely ever again to forget it.

The information in the *Memory Project* consists almost entirely of text: the names and dates and doings of thousands of people. In this regard it is complementary to the attempt by another artist to capture life in an ever-growing collection: Gerhard Richter's Atlas. Richter's information is visual, not textual, and his means for gathering it are not databases like Dreyblatt's but photos, collages and sketches. It concerns not individuals but landscapes, cities, skies, flowers, and found images.

In part, the difference in mode flows forth from the difference in subject matter. Leonardo da Vinci noticed the underlying phenomenon when he wrote that Painting presents the works of nature to our understanding with more truth and accuracy than do words or letters; but letters represent words with more truth than does painting. Transposed to my examples, this reads: Richter's Atlas is a better way of showing landscapes and cities, while Dreyblatt's Memory Project is to be preferred for biographical information. But Leonardo also went beyond the polarity when he said of

conveying anatomical information: Therefore it is necessary to both illustrate and describe.

That is the ideal. A device for the representation and retention of images and text, for visual impressions of nature and textual records of facts and figures. I have been told that material presented in simultaneous oral and visual form is retained many times better than lessons taught only in one form or the other. The software people with whom this column began might think contentedly: in that case, we're there. Multimedia is the new norm, isn't it? That may be so, but the computer is still not yet where it should be. There is still one major factor lacking in the equation.

Since 1990 not one but two major shifts have occurred in the relation of word and image on screen. The first was the triumph of the icon over the verbal command. This favored the image over the word. The second went in the opposite direction: with the meteoric rise of the World Wide Web the standard means of moving from one record to another became the hyperlink - the coded word or phrase which when clicked on transports you to another word or phrase. This operates through correspondences in meaning. What is missing is a means for clicking between image and image, not with reference to their captions or subjects, but to their visual qualities. When a computer can line up a thousand landscapes in order of the shape of their clouds, a thousand faces in order of eye color, a thousand paintings in order of compositional complexity, dragging their hypertexts with them - that will be the day when artificial memory will truly come into its own.

The basic form of this enterprise was already designed before the invention of the computer, by the great art historian Aby Warburg. Conceiving of all imagery as a single set of visual data, in 1927 he began composing Richter-like panels on which photos could be arranged to follow the evolution of formal patterns. He called this plan Mnemosyne - memory, the mother of the muses. I'm sure there are programmers out there who are working on Warburg's challenge. If and when Mnemosyne comes to computerized fruition, a new generation of muses will be born, who will inspire artists with the combined qualities of Richter and Dreyblatt. From the present-day past in which we live, I salute them.

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