

# Memory Theater One: Robert Edgar

by Ben Davis

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*This is the age of the proxy, the age of marketplace democracy, the age of endless availability, the age of the brand new, the age of the American economy, the age of deferred experience, the age of specialization and exclusion, the age of the deceived gaze, the age of appearances and opportunity, the age of the prerogative, the age of providence and information, the age of science fiction, the age of simulation, the age of the death of the subject, the age of endless duplication, the age of consumption and acquisition, the age of hyper-reality, the age of the present without a history.*

**Bruce Barber, Appropriation/Expropriation**

## The Age of Computer Art

Mnemosyne was the Greek goddess of memory. She is thought to have been the mother of the Muses. In times before printing, a trained memory was very important. Simonides (556-468 BC) is generally credited with inventing the art of memory. He is also the first to equate the methods of poetry and painting. Simonides thought of painting, poetry, and memory as intense visualization.

In an age of transition it is healthy to invent forms and language based on new interpretation of root meanings. As we pass into the post-print, electronic information world, Mynemosyne may become the goddess of the interactive metaphor.

Robert Edgar's low tech *Memory Theater One* is designed for "easy-chair" (is the arm-chair artist a reality now?) installation in your house or in a quiet gallery space. It is seductive on many levels because of its accessibility. It is an enlightening work. Edgar's background includes experimental video work at Synapse in Syracuse, NY, as well as stints in Silicon Valley and San Francisco working with computers.

*Memory Theater One* is an artwork or, as the accompanying document states: "An interactive postmodern metaphor." What, I wondered, would an art of memory look like today when no cosmology can summarize even a single text. Composed and designed for the Apple II series machines (II, II+, IIE), using GraForth language, the Theater incorporates imagery, literature, philosophy, and humor with animated three dimensional

graphics enabling the user to travel through a series of architectural spaces (27 rooms) and metaphors.

GraForth is an embodiment of the Forth language for use on the Apple 48 and 64K systems. It is fully compiled into 6502 machine language; it needs no code interpretation and is faster than Basic, Pascal, or other Forth languages. It draws three dimensional, color images at high speed for animation effects, text and graphics can be intermixed, and it allows for the use of long English identifier labels rather than numbers. The preference for words rather than numbers permits experimentation at the keyboard for fast program development. It was produced by Insoft, Inc. and was written by Paul Lutus. Edgar's use of GraForth is quite refined and quietly pushes the limits of the Apple in service to ideas rather than hypnotic graphic technique.

Fred Truck of The Electric Bank has likened the piece to an "extension of the structure of a floppy (disc)—a case in which the physical structure of the medium extends internally, penetrating the structure of the subject matter." Edgar's description of the Theatre architecture and its manipulation tell a great deal in simple, almost poetic terms how spatial and temporal design is employed: "What you will need to enter the Memory Theatre is a monochrome monitor (the program is not in color), two disk drives, joystick or Koala Pad attached to game port."

The rear atrium door opens to the top ring of rooms. The two-level ring of memory rooms rotates around the atrium, library, and additive memory room. The top rooms are painted with images and hold short autobiographical notes and memories. The Bottom rings each contain two pedestals, each holding an icon. The bottom rooms hold short quotes from books, newspapers, etc.

Besides going from top room (autobiographical) to bottom room (philosophical), the user is invited to browse in the library which holds text fragments from Frances Yates: *The Art of Memory*; A U.S. Army technical manual; Hollis Frampton, in *October*; W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox*; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*; Milton Erickson, *Selected Papers*; A Chinese Poem, by Fong; Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*; Jerome Bruner, *In Search of Mind*; Levi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners*; and the *New York Times*.

Also from Edgar's accompanying text:

"The additive memory room holds a cross sectional representation of the ring room. The 12 stamps arranged on the clock face are the result of exmode overprinting of all the room icons except the one it represents. The resulting stamp exhibits the differential pattern of all the overprinted icons...somewhat analogous to the differential pattern on an exposed holographic film. The ego in the additive memory room is the result of over printing, over one of the stamps, the difference—which becomes visible—is the mission icon. As the icon appears, a text fragment also becomes visible, corresponding to a letter of the alphabet, e.g.: 'f is for film, a construction machine.' "

This reference to holographic memory, where you can recreate the entire image from a fragment of the image, is key to Edgar's fascination with the low tech possibilities based on a deep concern for content rather than technical flash. Simulating the conceptual structure of a hologram on the Apple II is one example of the intersection of aesthetics and computer programming. The genetic structure of the hologram, itself a construct of the environmental inclusiveness of memory, housed in its own "additive" room gives the casual theatre goer a shock. The movement of perception from mind to machine back to mind becomes performance.

As you pass from room to room the computer animates a tumbling line drawing of the space so you can see where you are" in terms of up and down, left or right. The image of the room or memory cell recedes and returns to full screen, refreshing very quickly for the Apple II machines. The effect is very pleasing, and lets you mediate briefly between correlations. The rolling room is a wonderful image by itself, with its trap door in the floor becoming a hatch to the upper deck. Sometimes you wish you could hit fast forward and actually determine your own speed—a limit of the Apple environment, not Edgar's understanding of custom interactivity.



Edgar allows the user to manipulate and match hieroglyphs, the eye, the pistol, the falling man from the Lascaux cave painting, the lotus, the mandala, etc. and calls the particular icon you use as a cursor the "ego". All alphabetic text is stored and retrieved by moving the pictures and applying pressure to the joystick buttons at the appropriate spatial moment. Depending on which floor you're on, these gestures elicit Edgar's memories (top ring) an analytical or philosophical quotes (bottom ring). By moving between rooms that are opposites (up and down) you begin to correlate the personal and the published:

Upper room image: falling man is the cursor (ego), trail of astrology signs across the room ending with a line drawing of a kangaroo.

Upper room text: "They were talking in the other room. How, she wanted to know, could a singer sing a song she didn't know? A cameraman can turn away and snap an unexpected image, but how could a singer sing without intention? Without intending to make the notes she makes? What role can writing have in improvisation?"

Bottom room image: left pedestal holds dice. Right pedestal holds the words "ha ha."

Bottom room text: “The clown’s trippings and tumblings are the workings of his mind, for they are his jokes; but the visibly similar trippings and tumblings of a clumsy man are not the workings of that man’s mind.” (From Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*).

The example of a correlation of symbol, image, text, and context by questioning the vehicle of presentation (the computer) directly is a stunning structural move for it demonstrates visually Saussure’s concept that “At the (entirely theoretical) origin of meaning signifier and signified are like two superimposed layers, one of air, the other of water; when the atmospheric pressure changes, the layer of water divides into waves; in the same way the signifier is divided into articuli, meaning is therefore an order with chaos on both sides, but this order is essentially a division. Language is the domain of articulations.” (Roland Barthes: *Elements of Semiology*).

All computers are memory machines. That they store words and pictures with equal facility by translating them into binary code makes them by nature the engine for painting and poetry synthesis. How to recall the sense and forms creates interactive theatre. The computer is a teaching machine, openly didactic in its intention. Is the postmodern then interactive, environmental and totally involving? Does it approach the simulation rather than the metaphor? Is it about the creation of language rather than the repackaging of old terms? Contemporary physics has it squarks and gluons, not neo-protons or post-ions.

What Edgar seems to be making available is not just a metaphor, but a kind of aesthetic environment designed to deliver the user into the complex world of the present. To re-learn the properties of the engaged mind so damaged by massive doses of non-interactive information spewing from the carcass of the industrial age.

At one point I was looking at a drawing of a suburban home with a Chinese goldfish floating over it and thinking about the text : ”One night my father was swimming in the canal behind our house ‘I work on the house and keep the yard looking nice,’ he said. ‘The days go by...it’s really kind of a ridiculous life.’ I asked him what he would do if he could do anything he wanted. ‘I don’t really know,’ he said. ‘That’s what’s so ridiculous about it.’”

My own perception was jogged, it occurred to me that as a child I thought that at a certain point you would see events in your life flip past in a few seconds like a sequence in a movie where the characters would pass through the future to arrive at the action, the present in the film. Like the newspaper headlines in *Citizen Kane* that flipped by—1932, 1933, ’34 etc. Even as an adult I have been thinking this would happen. Without doing anything, I would wind up somewhere doing some action, doing the present. Is this amnesia visualized?

This kind of startling memory/perception collision seems to be a condition of mixing autobiography and film. A quote from Hollis Frampton in the theatre put it this way:

The intellect might picture a body called language, and a body called film, in symmetrical orbit around one another, in perpetual and dialectical motion.

But this brings up another problem.

This inclusive nature of Memory Theatre has the insidious facility of making you use its quotes and references when criticizing it. So seductively inclusive that you lose the sense that you can't add your own memories or quotes or mess up or misunderstand with "hands on" what's in there. A certain frustration sets in that is compounded by the realization that you can't really talk to the author (should we say theatre director?) who seems to be so present because the computer is simulating the artist's mind so carefully. A little like Willem de Kooning showing all the mental and physical process of making a painting and then telling you "don't try this at home." This conflict between art and utility, metaphor and simulation is very important. The resolution might be some kind of text/image editor that allows you to interject, to collaborate with the Memory Theatre. If, after all, the notion is to interact rather than witness you must be allowed to create. The opportunity for new art that the computer offers is this kind of interaction, correlation and collaboration. If art is to be truly active then it must be a kind of utility that provides inspiration as well as work space. Perhaps Joseph Beuys notion that everyone must become an artist is making sense.

In conclusion: Line drawing of a seated figure, his image (shadow?) projected from behind into space, without his chair:

Text: "Models of communication almost always depict a transmitter and a receiver. That's one reason why teachers who embrace such models do such a poor job while Reagan, who knows better, puts people on so easily. Puts on: like a radio, like a gas burner, like a skin, like a language: are we the stuff spoken or the tongue itself?"

Quote is by Edgar, in this case referring to Tony Schwartz's sender/receiver model in his book *The Responsive Chord*. The reference was supplied by Edgar in conversation, not from the Memory Theatre. A bibliography room would also have been useful.

P.S. Thankfully there is no Apple audio for this program. Memory Theatre One is silent, no obnoxious boings, beeps, or clicks. It worked wonderfully with Songs and Dances of the Tang Dynasty, Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, and Brian Eno's Music for Film.