

## Images and Words: Aristotle's Mimesis Revisited in the Unique Visual Work of Antonis Panagopoulos

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My subject is the notion of mimesis as conceived and formulated by Aristotle, since his philosophical theory diverged from the metaphysical domain of platonic ideas. It is known that for Plato the sensible world is one of deception and lies; therefore, the artist does nothing but to imitate the imitation of sensible objects. He is a cheater who intends to delude humans by his ability to re-present reality mimetically. On the contrary, Aristotle approaches positively the mimesis of the sensible world because he considers it as a creative and productive action of the human soul. Sensible beings, according to Aristotle, including works of art, encompass in themselves their intelligible essence, so they don't have to imitate any ideas outside themselves. Consequently, mimetic art in Aristotle's universe of thought is an inherent inclination to poetics founded in truth and reason; it always elaborates consciously its objects; and it furthermore signifies a learning process demanding systematic knowledge and meticulous method, though its roots are found in human instincts. Taken all the above as granted, this paper is also an attempt to evaluate in aesthetic level the visual works of art by Antonis Panagopoulos, a Greek artist very much influenced by Ancient Greek Philosophy, mostly by Aristotle. Since the 1990's, he has started an art project named "Éspace de Mémoire," in which he examines and articulates various ways of perceiving and cognitively constructing a work of art on the flat surface of the canvas.

*Keywords:* Aristotle, mimesis, poetics, Éspace de Mémoire

The starting point of my presentation is the work in progress by the visual artist Antonios Panagopoulos, named "Letters of Memory" and "Éspace de Mémoire." Though his oeuvre implies the platonic essence of the idea's theory, in practice it is more Aristotelian. And I am going to justify this view.

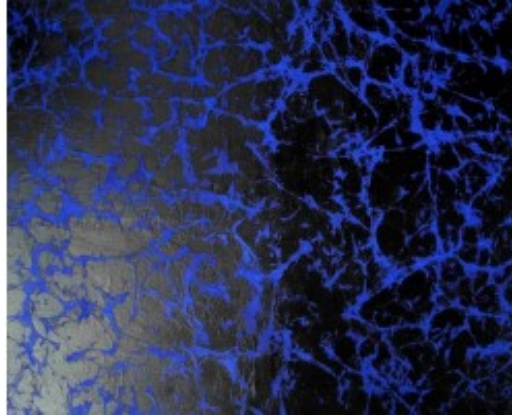
As an artist Panagopoulos has been working—from the 1980's—on the notion and the cognitive perception of space and time. His studies (Music, Engineering, Decoration, Structural applications and Painting) helped him to establish a persistent and thorough inquiry into space and time, inextricably connected in his artistic universe. His aim: to observe the effects of time on space, that is, how day and night, seasons, and temperature affect the surface of the canvas. In the beginning, he was interested in tracking and capturing on canvas the behavior of materials and their evolution and transfiguration on canvas.

Next step to his inquiry: on a surface weathered by time and space, the artist passes on a more complex and internalized process: the surface becomes the cradle of the artist's Weltanschauung. A guiding text is written on it:

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All the pictures used in the paper are kindly offered by the artist Antonis Panagopoulos.



Space of Memory

the time... the space... the fire, the water, the air, the earth... the memory... the human race... the logic... the past, the present, the future... the philosophy... the idea... *Éspace de Mémoire* blurry, blackwall, curtain without entrance to memory... the water flows, destroys, carries away, transforms, opens the blue aisle... the agony—the effort—the way—the proposal... *Éspace de Mémoire* the meditation—the time and the space for oneself—the solution—the position... *Éspace de Mémoire* the human memory—the memory of the universe—the memory of creation... (*Espace De Memoire E G O*)

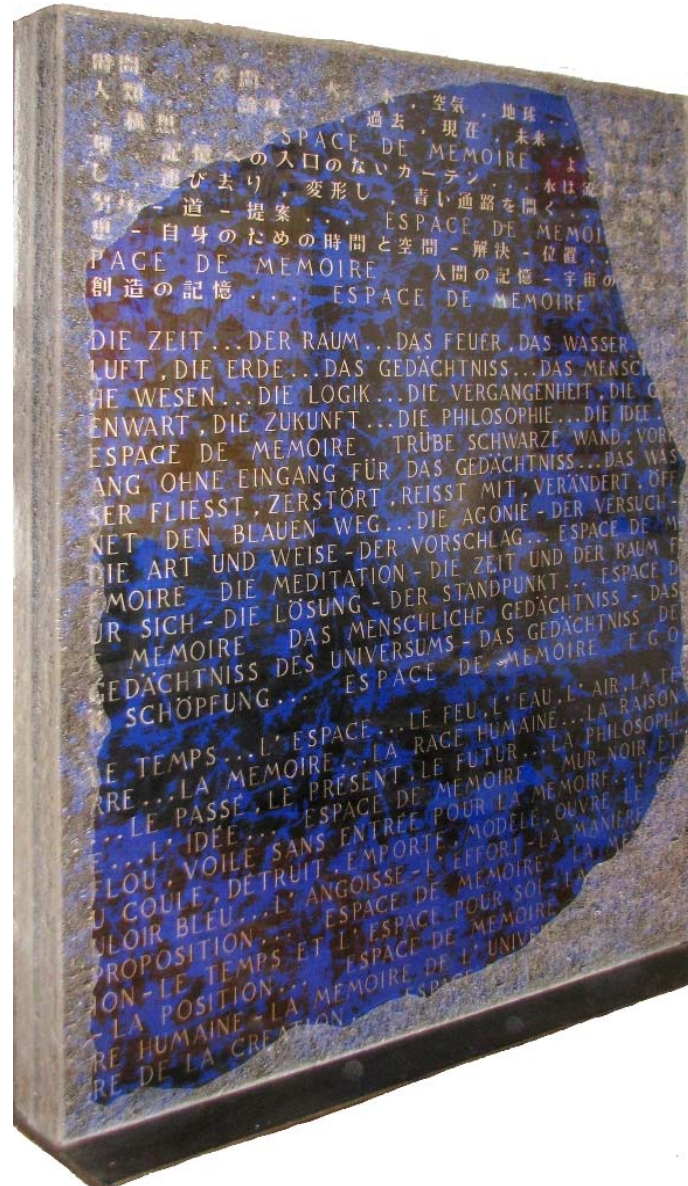
In the text of *Éspace de Mémoire*, we can read and see a cosmological view (four elements: earth, wind, fire, water), a reference to time and its movements, and above all, a repetition of the word “Memory” which emphatically reflects the requisite aspect and part of human existence, and which, furthermore, suggests the lineage of artistic creation.

In a more or less philosophical mood, A. Panagopoulos is examining the semiotic relationship of the word as matter and meaning, and he brings forth—once again—the major issue of language as posed and investigated by Aristotle in his book *De Interpretatione* (*Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας*) and *De Anima*. There, the Greek philosopher, giving a general account on meaning, starts his inquiry by defining words:

Spoken words then are symbols of affections in the soul and written words are symbols of spoken words. And just as written letters are not the same for all humans neither are spoken words. But what these primarily are signs of, the affections of the soul are the same for all, as also are those things of which our affections are likenesses... (Trans. Deborah Modrak 2000; 2009)



Espace de Mémoire Γαῖα Μνήμης (Earth of Memory). Rosette, side a: Hieroglyphic, English, Greek. Text on canvas, plexiglass, iron. 194×144×17 cm. From the Frankfurt BookFair 2001 *Mythologien des Buches*.



Espace de Mémoire ΓᾶςΜνήμης (Earth of Memory). Rosette, side b: Japanese, German, French. Text on canvas, plexiglass, iron.194×144×17 cm. From the Frankfurt BookFair 2001 Mythologien des Buches.



A. Panagopoulos, Espace de Mémoire in Latin.

The French writer François Taillandier in his book *L'écriture du monde* describes words in the world of crisis, that is, the 5th century in Europe, adopting an Aristotelian point of view: He wonders about their origin; he admires their multi-facet appearance and function and their behavior towards other words.

... The words, where they came from, what exactly they were. What were the words! What do we really know? What is a word? A sound we produce by blowing air through our lips, through our tongue over our teeth or our palate. Moreover, it's a kind of painting or sketch in ink. But it is also something else: realities that don't always correspond to tangible objects; they are ideal objects seen inside us or in our imagination. And then, the word changes its form or meaning according to its relationship to other words. (François Taillandier 2015)

Either tangible or intangible realities, the nouns and verbs of Panagopoulos's text flow on the surface of the canvas which imitates a more solid material (a rock for example). Redefining means and techniques, the artist chooses to use the essential minimum of the human lingual expression: nouns and verbs. Aristotle is explicit: They are both *φωναίσημαντικά* (significant voices) and *κατάσυνθήκη* (conventional). With the exception of verb which includes Time, these are the basic linguistic elements by which we are able to explore the inner and the outer human world; and they are honored by Panagopoulos because they map his own concerns, both artistic and philosophical.



In such a context, we should envisage the major wall installation called Memory which consists of its letters in 40 languages, and it was presented in Art Athina 2016.



An. Panagopoulos, The Letters of Memory in 40 languages. Various materials. 179×795 cm. Each letter 24.4×20.4 cm.

Thus, Mneme acquires its habitat as it converses with other φωναί (voices)—the matter of speech, according to Aristotle ψόφορσημαντικός (“meaningful sound” according to Aristotle’s *De Anima*); φωναί (voices) that become meaningful because they reflect the affections of the soul. We should notice: first, each letter of Mneme, in every linguistic/phonetic system Panagopoulos uses, either alphabetical or ideograms/hieroglyphics, or modern or ancient, still spoken or in oblivion, is honored by newly invented fonts; second, each letter is conceived and represented as an individual artistic event with its own colours and shapes, its own materials or technique, on a single and unique surface.



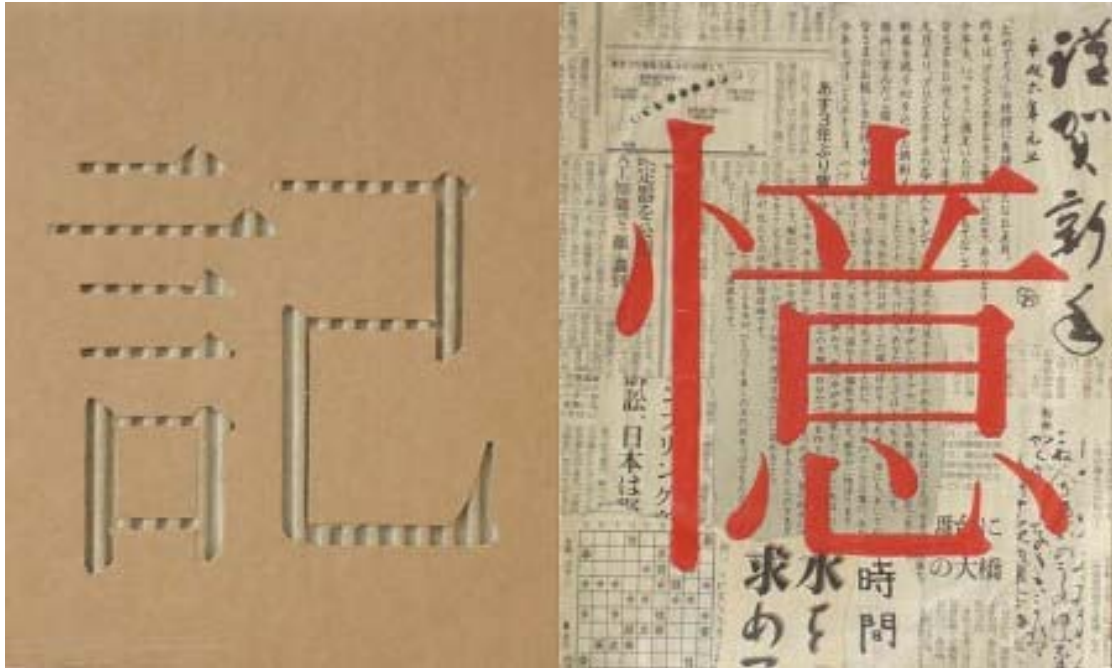
A. Panagopoulos, the letter C from the Polish memory PAMIEC.



A. Panagopoulos, Arabian Memory, 24.4×142.8 cm.



A. Panagopoulos, Linear B mi ni mi. 24.4×61.6 cm.



A. Panagopoulos, Japanese Memory, 24.4×40.8 cm.

As an ensemble, all the letters of Mneme converge into a multi-cultural and multi-lingual meltingpot, celebrating the retina. The artist has given emphasis to the sensorial perspective of his work; that is, he appeals to tactile and visual experiences of the beholder in order to enhance mimesis as a creative input of human soul.

Following certain rules and methods, Panagopoulos chooses the objects (here, the letters of Mneme in different phonetic systems) meticulously, and furthermore; he tackles with the meaning of the process aiming at a perfect whole, funded on mimesis: object as matter and form, content as an outcome of affection and of thought.

And thus, should we ask ourselves: what is the task of mimesis in the case of Panagopoulos's work? I believe that Ioannis Sykouris, one of the brightest philologists of the 20th century, has given a pertinent answer. "Mimesis is a world (κόσμος) per se, not a simple copy or transcription of the external flow of things; and as a world premises an embellishing mind (voũς) in a free and effective way according to the inner laws of the human soul. It is reality submitted in stylization."

In other words, mimesis doesn't signify unrefined and thoughtless process of work; of a certain reasoning and tryout. The realm of reality, based on the sensible and sensorial data, repels passive and slavish copies, and it implies the pleasure of mathesis (learning) and of form.

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