

# Living archives

David Houston Jones examines the afterlife of the archive in the work of Arnold Dreyblatt and Christian Boltanski.

Just what is at stake in the archive these days? The archive, it seems, has become a privileged figure for fakery, or perhaps a target for artistic projects that seek to put the archive's pretension to factual mastery under strain. The recent installation work of Arnold Dreyblatt is a provocative example.

Dreyblatt asks searching questions of the truth-status of archives, juxtaposing 'found' archival materials with electronic media. An American artist and composer, he has lived and worked in Berlin since 1984 and his found materials tend to originate from archival records in Eastern Europe before 1989. Many of the preoccupations of Dreyblatt's installations are revisited in his musical projects: a key example is *Who's Who in Central and East Europe*, which is the title of both the 'hypertext opera' Dreyblatt created in 1991, and the source-text which lies behind Dreyblatt's best-known installations<sup>1</sup>. The 1933 volume of *Who's Who in Central and East Europe* is the source-text (or 'historical hypertext' in Dreyblatt's words) of *The Great Archive* (1993), a single-room installation in the form of a cabinet containing four lateral glass sheets upon which text is inscribed. The archival text is undeniably present within the installation, and yet, because of the multiple layers, the reader struggles to focus upon it. It is the transparency of the text, rather than its oblique-

ness or obscurity, which makes reading difficult; it is very difficult to focus upon one layer of text without it being overlaid with another, its meaning obscured. Only occasionally can we identify a name, such as Elisabeth Rupsi, Clarisse von Gyorgiev or Ede Osolins. The vast majority of spectatorship is taken up with the struggle to focus and to separate one textual layer from another.

The piece suggests the vicissitudes of history, and the ease with which individuals' lives are lost or obscured. Paradoxically, for Dreyblatt, *Who's Who in Central and East Europe* has become a 'canonic and authoritative text', an ur-text 'to which no commentary or interpretation may be added'. It is this template which goes on to shape the entirety of Dreyblatt's installation work, constituting 'a geo-political memory of Central and Eastern Europe put together as if a puzzle from thousands of individual fragmentary stories, revealing an image of a vanished world captured at a critical point in time, which only a few years later would all but cease to exist'.<sup>2</sup>

The puzzle, though, may be more complex than at first appears. In focusing on the lost individual, and the erasure of identity through the passage of time, Dreyblatt seems to pursue a single-minded project of memorialisation, and yet the monolithic source-text can only be glimpsed through a multiplicity of textual surfaces. Its



Left: Arnold Dreyblatt, 'The Great Archive', 1992, lightbox, Plexiglass, text folio, 130x60x82cm, courtesy Galerie Ozwei, Berlin; photograph Giacomo Oteri. Right: Arnold Dreyblatt, 'T-Docs', 1992, 82 A4 documents in hanging plastic envelopes; courtesy Galerie Ozwei, Berlin; photograph Giacomo Oteri.

of the documents themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Dreyblatt's own comments draw attention to the manufactured nature of what appear to be authentic historical documents. It is tempting, then, to dismiss *The T Documents* as a crude simulation, but such a view does not account for the deeply felt preoccupation with memory and loss, which runs through Dreyblatt's work. 'T' may be a fictional protagonist or, in Jeffrey Wallen's words, 'a marginal world-historical figure' who paradoxically embodies both global significance and utter anonymity, but cannot be straightforwardly categorised as a fake.<sup>6</sup> Instead, for Wallen, 'T' is a means of addressing the disappearance of individuals from collective memory, and of commemorating that disappearance in the after-life of the archive:

*'Dreyblatt's 'remediation' gives us a different standpoint: the 'life' of the document. Rather than drawing us toward trying to ascertain or understand a precipitating*

*event, the true happening, some actual moment in the 'life' of a person that generates these series of observations (what was T really trying to accomplish in November of 1934?), this redisplay of material displaces our attention from an origin to an afterlife, and from the individual to the archival, to the now public traces that continue to circulate.*

*Any desire to recover an original moment of intention or of action or of observation or of inscription or of transmission (and the multiplication of possible starting points already testifies to a crisis of determination) gives way, when one becomes drawn in to the 'T Project', to other fascinations.'<sup>7</sup>*

Dreyblatt's archival 'fascinations' provide a blueprint for contemporary installation work concerned with cultural memory. Instead of the certainty apparently provided by *Who's Who in Central and East Europe*, Dreyblatt's work increasingly turns to the mediation and remediation of memory, of its uncertain and aleatory



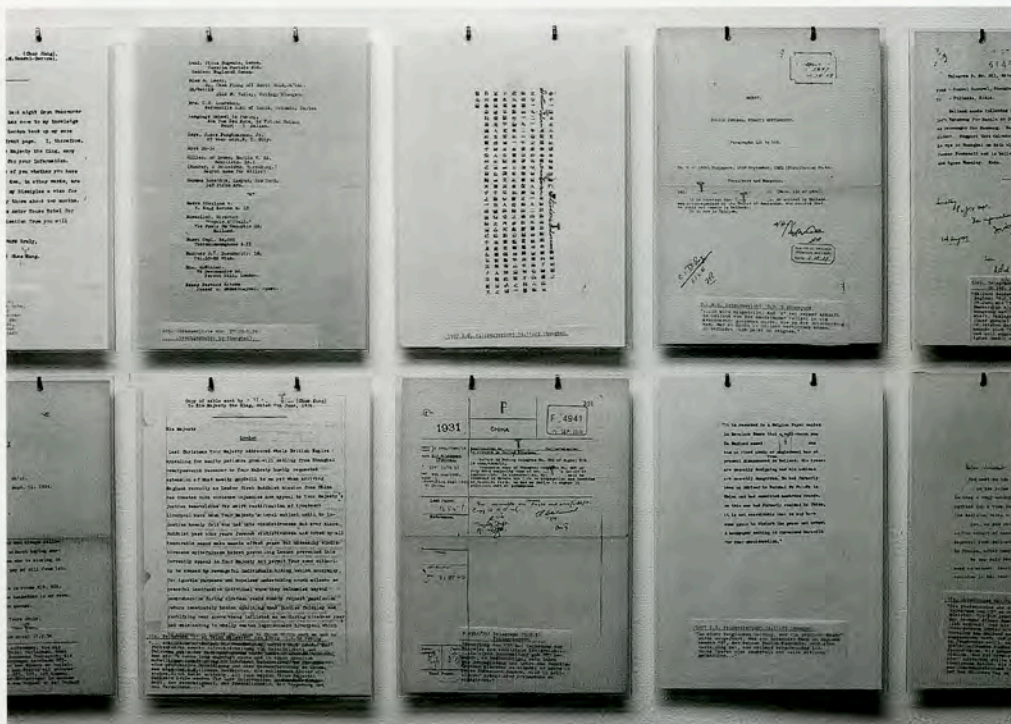
Arnold Dreyblatt, 'The Reading Room', 2001, furniture, projections, misc. materials; variable room installation and performance; -courtesy Kornhaus, Bern, photograph Arnold Dreyblatt.

solidity contrasts with the ephemerality of the installation and the endless repetition of the reading process, which the piece initiates.

The elegaic aspect of Dreyblatt's work rivals that of Christian Boltanski: it is profoundly concerned with the inevitability of death, and with the need to memorialise. But, like Boltanski's work, it also contains disingenuous strategies. In the *Dead Swiss* installations, Boltanski can only memorialise the Jews murdered in the Holocaust by means of dead Swiss citizens: 'Before, I did pieces with dead Jews but "dead" and "Jew" go too well together. There is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is no reason for them to die, so they are more terrifying in a way. They are us.'<sup>3</sup> In taking pains to avoid direct reference to the Holocaust, Boltanski only amplifies the resonance, which the oblique reference to the Jews contains. In order to commemorate, his work undergoes an extraordinary detour, divesting itself of reference and attaining an apparently parodic loading. In Dreyblatt,

meanwhile, an analogous problem surfaces as reference to the archival text is attenuated. In *The T Documents* (1992), Dreyblatt strikes at the heart of the problem of the artefact that dogs Boltanski's work. The piece is one of Dreyblatt's fullest and most persuasive simulations of the archive: it is 'derived from over 4,000 intelligence documents from State Archives in Europe and North America from the inter-war period which have been collected by the artist.'<sup>4</sup> It is, in part then, the product of Dreyblatt's extensive research in a plethora of real libraries and archives, from Koblenz and Bonn to London and Washington. Its apparent positivism is, in fact, coupled to an elaborate process of fakery:

'In the installation *The T Documents*, the artist's personal selection of 84 original archive documents have been digitised and faked by specially developed printing techniques applied to the reverse side of postwar East German archival pages, posing questions about the identity of both the subject's personality and the authenticity



passage through media and between archives. In creating new, fantasised 'originals' of archival documents, Dreyblatt presents an imaginative response to the losses and indeterminacies that afflict the archive. The lost individual is recuperated in imaginative form. In Dreyblatt's recent work, particularly the *Reading Projects* (1991-2005), the tendency is amplified through the creation of living archives. The observer is invited to actively participate in the experience of the archive: having entered the reading room, she is able, as a 'participant in a temporary functioning archival system', to request documents. She must know what she is looking for beforehand, and fill in forms by hand in order to call up materials and take responsibility for consulting them. Dreyblatt brings about a remarkable encounter between the genuine and the fake. It is only in this archival space, and in the viewer's immersion in its self-conscious bureaucratic apparatus, that the question of the archive's authenticity can be decided.

- [1] *Who's Who in Central & East Europe*, ed Stephen Taylor (Zürich: Central European Times Publishing Co., 1935)
- [2] F Dreyblatt, *The Memory Work*, Performance Research 2, no.3 (1997).
- [3] Boltanski, quoted in Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), pg128.
- [4] Dreyblatt, *The T Documents*, <http://www.dreyblatt.de/pages/arts.php?seite=11&id=&more=103#more> Accessed 11.5.11.
- [5] *ibid.*
- [6] Arnold Dreyblatt and Jeffrey Wallen, *Hands on the Document: Arnold Dreyblatt's T Archive*, in Sonja Neef, José van Dijk, and Eric Ketelaar (eds), *Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of New Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pg138.
- [7] *ibid.*, pg142.