Archived Memories
Interview with Arnold Dreyblatt, "Intelligent Agent", 1997

Arnold Dreyblatt is the creator/producer of Memory Arena (http://www.uni-lueneburg.de/memory/). The project is based on a found text—the biographical dictionary *Who's Who in Central and East Europe 1933*. The dictionary was transformed into a hypertext database and then into a "hypertext opera," which premiered in East Berlin in February 1991. The biographical data were then revised for a new print edition consisting of text segments from 765 biographies which appear both in alphabetical order and have been categorized according to 143 themes. *Memory Arena —A Journey through the Archive*—has been presented as a multimedia project in various forms: it has been staged as an interactive performance/installation in a physical space where visitors can browse through files created from *Who's Who* and other biographical data, texts about the process of archiving and other documents. *Memory Arena* also exists as CD-ROM and is now available on the Web. Arnold Dreyblatt, who is best known in the US as a composer, currently lives in Berlin. IA spoke to him during a recent visit to New York.

IA: *Memory Arena* has been under development for 4 years and has been staged in various European cities, Munich, Copenhagen…

AD: Well there have been fi rst of all a number of projects based on the same text *Who's Who in Central and East Europe 1933*, which I found in Istanbul in 1985. My first project based on this text was what I called a "hypertext opera," which was a proscenium situation, with a passive audience staring at the stage. That involved three speakers, who read fragments of the texts, and also projections of images within an acoustical and light environment. I created a structure in a hypertext form with the help of Heiko Idensen. In a sense I tried to simulate one chosen path through the hypertext in a proscenium situation. After that I worked two years on the version in book form. For the first performances I had set up a database, and made multiple searches through my chosen 765 biographies, but for the making of the book I generated the information a second time. Then I started working on installation situations and sort of a gallery situation, with this text and related texts, and that's where a metaphor—the archive as memory—developed in relation to this kind of historical material. "Memory Arena" began about 4-5 years ago. I began working on this hypertext opera at a time when there wasn't much of a WWW or anything, in 91, and then we started speaking about a more general concept of "Memory" and began working with it. The first realization was in '95 in Hamburg and Munich, and then in Copenhagen in the fall of '96.

IA: And how long has the website existed?

AD: Actually it's very new, a work in progress. Martin Warnke and Carmen Wedemeyer invited me to collaborate with the Kulturinformatik Department at the University of Lüneburg [Germany]. They just finished calculating the cross-links at the "Who's Who" site. With the cross-links one is able to check where and in what category the fragments of a given biography appear. Formerly, you could only click on the name and go to biographical information. But it's now being set up so that you can also cross to every location where a person appears. We did the site for the performances of "Memory Arena" in Copenhagen where, for the first time, we had the hypertext navigation center where people could come in and access the website on

CD-ROM locally. There was a staff of people from the University of Lüneburg, who worked on the programming, and they came to Copenhagen and actually guided the people (many of whom had never used a computer before) through it. I'd like to eventually have other aspects of my work accessible at the site, such as my project in collecting conversations worldwide between archivists on the Internet—discussions on the fragility of record keeping. This material is also included in the "Memory Arena" archive and scrolls on computer monitors during the performance.

IA: The project makes a lot of sense on the Web. As Jeffrey Wallen points out in his introduction at the website, biography is an act of recovery, the recovery of a past that always exists in fragments. And the Web is all about fragments and retrieving them.

AD: I work with this kind of fragmented personal histories, so that even in a physical situation of a performance about memory we have an archive filled with paper files, where visitors can actually place an order for a document, just as we go to the server and search for information. So it functions as a storage medium and as a distribution network. And there also is a digital display—a digital projection of scrolling text (from the same archive). One of my concerns is what remains from the past, how we search, how we find something, just as on the Web where we are waiting, surfing and making associations. From the beginning, the work was about making the same kind of associations within historical texts as found in the original book. This book is considered as a bible, it contains alphabetical entries. I'd start randomly fiipping the pages and had these incredible associations within this 'closed' or 'given' text, a world in itself. The Web is a perfect medium to randomly surf or whatever we want to call it. And you have to wait all the time, it's like real life.

IA: It's also very much about the fragmentation of the subject, particularly if you're dealing with people who are long dead, and all you have left are biographical fragments.

AD: A lot of the work, I think, has different aspects, and when you look at the text itself one of the considerations is, "What is biographyfi" And then, during the project, Fred and I are often asked for more information, a standard response is, "it's certainly all very interesting but it's not enough." And of course the point is, it's all we have, it's just these fragments of words, in this case a few lines, you have to read between the lines, the information is limited. There was once a very beautiful comment by the director of the State Theater in Munich. In describing the experience of taking part in "Memory Arena" as one of the 700 readers, he said—as he began to read—how interesting it was for him to see what all these people did and how much interesting information actually remains from the past, what a miracle that anything remains. And as he was reading on, out loud of course, he realized that he was just like another one of those people he was reading about. That he would just be sort of a fragment, a name, and a birthplace in another fifty years… a selection of either important or non-important information.

IA: The project also addresses the futility of trying to assemble a history through the fragments, since it's always already mediated. It always remains removed, you can never get in touch with it, perhaps you're getting closer in the "real" performance where you're dealing with "real" people. AD: And even there, in the performance of it, and in a way in various kinds of performances, the material is presented in such a

way that you're always left considering, what does it mean, of what use is itfi Does it really say anything about the past or notfi At moments it does, and at other moments it seems absurd. So I've been asked very often about what happens to these people after 1933. But of course the boundaries of the project don't include anything more than what is written. In that sense, it always is this found text, and it's a given text that's never altered and that's just resifted in different ways. It's not about what happens to these people on the path outside the project. It's not about a time period, although it may give some information about the time and region, it's more about the question, how can one present so many fragmentary stories at one timefi So it's ungraspable on the one hand, and, on the other hand, it certainly contains some sense.

IA: It was a truly Kafkaesque experience, navigating through the archives dealing with all the kinds of classification/bureaucratization which of course makes a lot of sense in connection with the Holocaust and the whole historical period the project refers to—Eastern Europe 1933…

AD: Well, again, these things always have negative and positive aspects, especially in Germany because there's something like the Datenschutzgesetz [Personal Records Privacy Protection Act], this whole question about the census [which took place in the mid-eighties in Germany and led to a heated discussion about the protection of personal information]… because of the reference to the Nazi period there's a real sensitivity to what is personal information. It sort of has come back again with the Stasi [former East German secret police] past. The pieces have very different associations here. My feeling is that at first information is neutral in a sense, I mean the information itself. It's clear that information in the wrong hands can do a lot of damage, but the whole idea of the project is not a value judgment about the material. It's good for the Web and works in *Memory Arena*, because you're able to, in a way, sift it yourself. The setup is that you are able to mimic what I did as I prepared the information. As an artist, I'm setting certain directions and I've already selected what I've found to be an interesting representation of 765 persons. I've taken out and categorized what I found to be the most interesting information. But then there's a lot of leeway of how readers travel through that and make their own connections and associations.

IA: In how far was that effect intentional, the idea of the archives as a form of classification in this historical context?

AD: As far as the classification, again, I think it's just a way to consider what information is being collected. Let's go back to the transition from oral tradition to written memory. In an oral tradition, people may memorize their own collective culture. With the development of printing, we are more and more storing our culture outside ourselves. The more you store it outside, the more you have to classify. The act of classifying, we've always been doing that. It's like the metaphor of the brain transferred outside to the world as a projection. In classification, you're always putting things in little boxes, and it helps us find them again. In the western tradition of memnonics—as explained in the works of Francis Yates (*The Art of Memory*), how first in Greece and then in the Renaissance—it's more associational, you graph an idea onto an image and link them, which again maybe refiects on the possibilities of what happens on an Internet site. It has a kind of classification, which is like a library classification, but one can cross through it, it's the one thing that works laterally. One

method for getting information is to scan, whether you're walking down the streets looking at the shops, or looking at shelves in a library. In libraries that have no shelves we have to look in a card catalogue or in a database to find stuff. But it's not the same as wandering through computer stacks and letting things grab your attention. And that's something here that interests me. Even in the proscenium situation of the "hypertext opera" version of *Who's Who*, you're given so much information that you can't grasp it all. There's only a limited amount of words that can be presented in a two-hour performance. There are so many images and texts presented concurrently that you're still faced with choosing what to listen to, what to read and what to look at. In these cases, there are many more possibilities for making your own associations. Of course, on a negative side you just keep clicking, it starts with having a remote on a TV and it ends with sitting on the Internet for days, like in front of a pinball machine, actually traveling a lot and reading but not understanding, and not receiving anything finally. This is the other aspect, not being able to conclude, to summarize or interpret.

IA: How long did the actual performances last, the "Memory Arena" installation/performance?.

AD: My first idea was a 12 hour day in Vienna, and it was never realized. It may still be realized, but it's pretty difficult, it's so much money, it's quite a financial burden for the producers. The first realization was 4 hours a night for 3 days. The second one was 3 hours a night for 3 days. And then the last one was 4 hours a night 4 days. So we experimented with a few different formats and I think that 4 hours a night for 3 days is the best. While it has to be broken up we still think of it as one performance. When Fred and I began working on the plans for it, we thought of it as something that could actually go on forever. It's already going on and when you leave, it will continue to go on; it has a ritual aspect: it might be like a culture, a city, which comes together once a year to do this, or something like that. Again, it's a metaphor for what could be.

IA: The introduction to the performance itself is an interesting concept, the idea that you read a text to people and throw more information at them than they can actually process.

AD: Right. So that was the case in the opera, and within "Memory Arena" there are so many different stations within the bureaucratic labyrinth. You get this introductory lecture, and have to figure out what you can do and how you can make use of the working facilities in the installation. A Japanese journalist called it a "memory theme park." We've been expanding to such an extent… the main activity is the readings, but even in the readings you can read the text as you're strolling, you can listen to it in the center of the Arena, you can go to individual tables. There's the hypertext navigation center, there's the big blackboard in the cafe where you can watch the schedule, you can look at the exhibitions, and you can go into a reading room with areas where you can hear the sounds of the readers in another space. So there's sort of a lot of different ways in which we transfer the basic idea. It's not just like coming to an event and then leaving, it gives people the opportunity to find out for themselves what it is and how to interact with it. People come up with very different senses of what it is. It's an environment you could actually remain in. You could use it in the sense that you can do your own research in it. So it's not a passive event.

IA: It's real-time interactive.

AD: One weird thing is that this whole interactive thing usually is a cause-and-effect situation. You do something, click on something and something happens over there. But this situation was about involving people into the dynamics, so that performers and audience are actually interchangeable at any point. Not only in the readings but also in the space. You're looking at people going through it and you're in it at the same time.

IA: Are you still planning to stage "Memory Arena" in other cities in Western and Eastern Europe culminating in a version that establishes an "Old" and "New World" link at the Ellis Island Immigration Center in New York Harbor?

AD: This is a can of worms, because it's gotten more and more expensive to do. We'd like to do it in the US. It's really a matter of finding the resources and a situation for us to do it in. It could take a while. We're negotiating with a few cities in Europe to do it again. And I'm working on another project—actually, I don't have enough time to work on it—which is the T project. Did you read about it?

IA: Can you talk about that a little?

AD: Soon after I found the *Who's Who in Central and East Europe 1933* book in Istanbul in 1985, I saw an advertisement by a writer, a British writer who is doing a book on a peculiar kind of person whose main period of activity was in between the World Wars. He was born in Hungary. He had over 50 different aliases. False names and multiple lines of professions. In a sense, Who's Who is almost like one biography, it's so fragmented it strikes you as one possible person. This person is the reverse. He's like one person who was many biographies, who was followed very, very closely by the secret services of many European countries. He was in prison, he worked in the espionage circles, was a member of parliament in England, owner of Romanian oil-wells, a worldwide career, always forging his own identity. That takes him in the direction not only of this collective historicizing of the past; now it's about the oxidation of one life and identity. I have a few thousand pages of copies of these files on him, so I've tried to get all this material into a database. What's interesting about it is that a lot of the information is like e-mail because it's cables—international cables where, for example, the Home Office in London would cable some Foreign Office in Colombo who would then read it, and then forward it to Beijing, and then they would send it somewhere else. Cables back and forth and it's all just about this one guy, where he's going and what he's doing. And again, it's real life. It's dealing with history but in a different way. I did some exhibitions where I showed 110 sample documents. I scanned the ptotocopies and re- printed them on the back of East German police documents that I found thrown out in Potsdam [Germany], they They appeared so real (in their newly re-created form) that visiting historians (to the installation) read them and threatened to call the police to tell them that I stole the documents from the archives. *T* an improbable figure, who lived under all these different false names and who seemed to be everywhere, you couldn't tell if all these documents referred to the same person. But then again they seemed falsified, but they were falsified documents about a real person printed on the back of real documents to look real. That was the beginning of the project, and we've been exhibiting the documents in some of the *Memory Arenas*. Now it's time to get this new project out. I'm trying to get the resources to get this going. The *T* project will

obviously not be a stage performance. I have a feeling that it's going to be a network of some kind, mimicking this spatial and information network of that time. But I'm still trying to find places where we might be able to realize *Memory Arena*. It'll probably happen a few more times in Europe before it comes to the States.

IA: Ellis Island.

AD: That's could be my dream. On July 4th.