Supported Work in Cultural Remembrance
Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, 2003

[Motto:] “When the time comes, this compendium will serve as a great treasury of memories and a unique proof of resurrection.” (Danilo Kis: *Encyclopedia of the Dead*) (1)

The art of memory, which traces back to Roman antiquity, begins with an unfortunate accident. During a celebration, the banquet hall collapsed, burying the guests beneath it. Only the poet Simonides escaped death 2). Because he recalled where everyone sat before the collapse, he was later able to identify the maimed corpses.

If we believe the Simonides legend, then mnemonic technique goes back to an artist. But this technique can also be regarded as an art because it thereafter imagined memory as an artificial series of rooms in which objects and images are placed for recollection by wandering through these imaginary rooms, in accordance with later need. What is equally true from the ancient study of rhetoric, whose elementary component was mnemonic technique, through the theater of memory of a Giulio Camillo in the 16th century, to the warehouse architecture of today is the interlocking, the “thinking together” of memory and space (which one must see as also including, in a certain way, pictures with their spatial illusionism).

Of course, what is usually neglected in this artificial legend is the close and, in a strange way, almost complementary connection between memory and catastrophe. Quite early, collective memory, as a specific cultural technique, appears closely akin to the consciousness of survival and of the survivors – a fact of crucial significance for remembrance in the 20th century, especially against the background of its catastrophes. This all the more since catastrophes and their shocking appearance are usually thought to be tied to forgetting, the loss of memory, amnesia, and even repression of memory.

Recent research on memory thus strictly distinguishes between history and memory; this distinction has “become a primary difference” 3). According to Maurice Halbwachs, history exists only in the singular, but in contrast, (collective) memory basically exists only in the plural, whereby the role of collective memory is to secure the identity and the continuity of a group. History has no such function. It responds to changes that are, in turn, mostly excluded from a group’s collective memory. The philologist and memory researcher Aleida Assmann describes the original impetus of collective memory as follows: “Cultural memory has its anthropological core in remembering the dead. By this I mean the kin’s duty to retain the names of their dead in memory and sometimes to pass them on to posterity.” 4)

Only with burial did the histories of the dead come to a conclusion. In the past, they were memorized and passed on from generation to generation. Later they were written down, perhaps treated as private matters, and stored together with pictures in family albums. Or, if this was in the public interest, they were publicized, treated as documents, and sometimes “filed away”. With the spread of alphabetic script and especially of movable type, new spaces opened up in which remembering the dead found a place: paper spaces of knowledge storage, externalized memories like the lexicon, the encyclopedia, the library, and the archive.

The archive, which derives from the Greek “archeion”, was initially a house, a home, an address 5). As such, as a spatial systematization (and specialization) of memory, i.e., as a privileged topology of preservation, it was the externalized memory par excellence. “There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain, exteriority. No archive without outside,” underscored the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his work on the archive. 6)

It seems to me that this precarious relationship between memory and archive, i.e., between internal (human) and external (institutionalized) ways of remembering, is a central aspect and the real field of tension in the work of the American artist Arnold Dreyblatt: “Just as our collective memories have become externalized by society, so has our individual memory become internalized as we become preoccupied with problems of personal identity. It is as if we have lost the mediators between the external and internal.” 7)

In exploring this loss, this equally concentrated and complex work is nourished to a great degree “from the archives” themselves, in that it thematizes the archive – and its media – in various ways: as an addressable site and as a source of information, as a traversable space and as a structure of organization. This begins – actually rather banally – with its content: texts and documents.

“My work developed out of some found historical texts. It thereby touches upon questions of memory and community as well as of biography or micro-history. While I de- and reconstructed a hypertext out of these original texts, my interests expanded, so that they also included the area of ‘archiving and storage’ itself, which, especially in Europe, mirrors the current interest in the topic of memory: what we want to forget, what we want to remember, and the how, why, and where of storage and of remembering.” 8)

It was the merit of French historians associated with the magazine *Annales* to have opened up history writing to everyday culture and the biographies of ordinary people, i.e., for what is called “microhistory”; another Frenchman, Michel Foucault, later took particular interest in the practices and rules of archives. These authors’ considerations provide the theoretical background for almost all discussions of the concept of memory in the second half of the 20th century. But neither the *Annales* school nor Foucault foresaw the role that the technical and especially digital media would play in storing and processing data. 9)

The book Dreyblatt initially speaks about and that he found by coincidence in a used bookstore in Istanbul in 1985 has since become the fulcrum of his artistic oeuvre. It is a biographical lexicon titled *Who’s Who in Central & East Europe* 10). Influenced by William Burroughs’ cut-up technique, Dreyblatt worked on and with the material – in other words, with the individual biographies found in the lexicon: turning it manually (and visually) into fragments of text and individual documents, compositionally into a kind of libretto, and electronically into a hypertext. This procedure permits not only the reactualization of the text fragments in various performative contexts (or means of artistic staging), but also various mechanisms of connection and constantly shifting or newly blazed paths. 11)

Arnold Dreyblatt's installations only appear to be empty of people. The human figure does not appear in the technological and media arrangements or in the illuminated text images, at least not as a likeness. But much indicates the presence of people: names, dates of births and deaths, life histories with changing occupations, changing residences, and blows of fate. The paradox of memory: It is the presence of the absent.

But people appear in another way. Indeed, a central place is given them as viewers and above all as readers: sometimes in an active way, as part of a collective (reading) performance; sometimes more passively, as in the case of *The Wunderblock* (2000), as the silent witness of a seemingly self-operating text process on a computer monitor. Dreyblatt's works would not exist without the viewer. What is not immediately obvious is the privilege accorded to script: Dreyblatt's universe of memory is primarily text-based; one could also say the texts, in interplay with the media and their staging, are the images, script images in a sense 12).

Pictures in the conventional sense, in contrast, are the exception. Where they are integrated, they serve documentary purposes (or dictate them), referring for example to a seeming typology, as in the case of the numerous small illustrations of archives and data storage all over the world, which interrupt the linear flow of text like additional punctuation in the scroll *Artificial Memory* (1999). These buildings and rooms, these consoles and casings for data architectures seem to underscore the contingency of collecting and archiving more than they could help to illustrate the systematic character of these activities. But this is precisely the theme of this work: The numerous text passages that one must follow in absolutely endless lines across the scroll, which is 18 meters long, all come from an unfinished and in principle unfinishable Internet discussion on issues of archiving. Here the scroll, and with it the aesthetic use of an ancient principle of text storage, contrasts not only with the archive as an institutional form of modernity, but also with postmodern methods of storage-free communication in the Internet 13).

By making media and storage models from various times converge, overlap, and interpenetrate each other, Dreyblatt not only reveals the paradoxes inherent in the supposed progress of techniques of memory, he also simultaneously vividly illustrates Marshall McLuhan's fine point "that the 'content' of a medium is always another medium" 14).

In some more recent, extremely spare, almost minimalistic installations, a completely different discovery moves into the thematic foreground. Namely, the discovery that every remembrance includes a forgetting, and further, that this inclusion (in memory, in the archive) depends on the conscious or unconscious exclusion of something else. Dreyblatt makes this plain through the structural coupling of illumination and blinding glare. 15)

The room is empty except for a cylindrical form on a metal stand, a kind of oversized floor lamp whose contours are only barely recognizable in the darkness. This changes suddenly when – for a fraction of a second – a glaring light flashes. Then the white umbrella of the installation is not only clearly visible for literally "the blink of an eye", the viewer also notices that this "lampshade" apparently functions as the carrier of a text. But this "lucid moment" is too short to be able to decipher very much of it. One retains only this or that word in memory. (If this is, for example, the word

“forgetting”, which appears in the text, the dialectic would be perfect, of course.) When, after the sudden and lightning-like impression, everything falls back into darkness, the text-image turns into its opposite. It appears for a few moments as white script on a dark ground, an effect known in perceptual physiology as an afterimage.

A script as if out of a liminal realm: originally perceived as a shock by the external, corporeal eye, it seems as if floating before one's inner eye (if one turns one’s head, the image follows). It is still there and yet already on its way to becoming memory, merely a trace, a path that has burned a track 16).

Dreyblatt’s installation *Recovery Rotation* (2003) relates to the idea of the suddenly appearing memory. Except that here, paradoxically, it “returns” from the outside in a manner – of course, technically staged – that resembles the mechanism with which Sigmund Freud explained the psychological phenomenon of projection. Perhaps it is thus no coincidence that another model that Freud used to explain the way memory functions in the psychological apparatus plays an elementary role in another of Dreyblatt’s works. One could see in it the converse of the “Floor Lamp”. Arnold Dreyblatt’s installation *The Wunderblock* is quite obviously intimate: a table, a chair, a light bulb, and an obscure object on the table. The latter is particularly conspicuous, due to the yellow color of its frame, and stands out from the neutral design of the ensemble. And yet something is put into play: two texts that interlock with each other on the monitor. Text A consists of fragments of a glossary for archivists; Text B is a famous text by Sigmund Freud, his “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad”, which he presumably wrote in Fall 1924 and which is so short and striking that it could almost be encompassed on such a magic slate. 17)

A characteristic of Dreyblatt’s installation is that it tries to take Freud’s text at its word, and this in a double sense: First, by letting the words of the text themselves surface as traces of memory of the kind referred to in the note. And second, by transferal to the memory processes of the computer, to the processing of sets of data (digital memory traces), for example in the two storage variants RAM (= Random Access Memory), i.e., the working storage space, a kind of computer short-term memory, and ROM (= Read Only Memory), the form of storage that can be read, but not altered.

The light bulb over the table also has special importance. Only seemingly does it serve to illuminate the room. Its light contributes no illumination to our ability to read the text on the monitor, anyway, since the latter is legible without it. Indeed, if the viewer wants to read what stands written there, he has to bend over the magic slate, thereby casting a shadow on the object. Of course, most viewers of Dreyblatt’s work will hardly become aware of their shadow. The latter thus becomes the viewer’s externalized unconscious, injected into the picture. In other words, the viewer “internalizes” the magic slate by projecting a shadow; the memory machine and the viewer’s head coincide on the surface of the table.

The Wunderblock and *Recovery Rotation* both elude legibility. The installations demand that we read, but at the same time they prevent it. In analogy to the complementarity of remembering and forgetting, this paradox of unreadability also expresses a fundamental doubt. It fundamentally questions the reliability of memory, even memory “externalized” in the archive, thus bringing me back to the theme of the

catastrophe. For in Dreyblatt's work the catastrophe is still present, if only by allusion to an ominous epoch. A year that marks a dividing line and the beginning of the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century: 1933. The *Who's Who in Central and East Europe* was the first and only biographical lexicon that focused solely on this region 18), and this book, which appeared in 1935, may have been the last of its kind. Even if Dreyblatt's work does not make this explicit, it is probably difficult, especially in Germany, to "read" this epoch without dark associations. Especially since the annihilation of the Central and Eastern European Jews was also ultimately calculated to end in a systematic extinction of historical memory. In this sense, Dreyblatt is pursuing what is ultimately a utopian project. He takes a journey into Everyman's biography, like that imagined by Gertrude Stein – an important influence on Dreyblatt – in her *The Making of Americans*. And, to prevent what may be an even greater catastrophe, the catastrophe of forgetting, he aims to resurrect the dead – in the text.

(Translation: Mitch Cohen)

Footnotes:
1) Danilo Kis: The Encyclopedia of the Dead, English translation copyright 1983 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.
2) Simonides' story, the special circumstances of his rescue, and the associated origins of mnemonic art as the recollection of seating arrangements were already told by Cicero in "De oratore". Discussion of this is the starting point for Frances A. Yates in her foundation-laying book "Gedächtnis und Erinnern. Mnemonik von Aristoteles bis Shakespeare", Weinheim 1990, here pp. 11 [Engl. The Art of Memory, London 1966]
3) Aleida Assmann, Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, Munich 1999, p. 130. For the distinction between collective, cultural, and communicative memory, see Jan Assmann, Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, Munich 1992.
4) Aleida Assmann: Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, Munich 1999, p. 33. 5) On this and the following, see Jacques Derrida, Dem Archiv verschrieben, Berlin 1997, pp. 11.
6) Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever (translation of "Dem Archiv verschrieben"), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, p. 11.
7) Arnold Dreyblatt, The Memory Work, in: Performance Research 2 (3)/1997, p. 93.
8) Arnold Dreyblatt, Hypertext und Erinnerung als Performance und Installation. In: Martin Warnke/Wolfgang Coy/Georg Christoph Tholen (eds.), HyperKult. Geschichte, Theorie und Kontext digitaler Medien, Basel/Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 267.
9) On this, see Wolfgang Ernst, Das Rumoren der Archive. Ordnung aus Unordnung, Berlin 2002, pp. 14. On the problematics of dealing with documents and archives in the computer age. Cf. also: Hartmut Winkler, Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer, Regensburg 1997, and David M. Levy, Scrolling Forward. Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age, New York 2001.
10) R. P. D. Stephen Taylor (ed.), Who's Who in Central & East Europe, Central European Times Publishing Co., Zürich 1935.
11) But this is precisely where the theoretician Katherine Hayles sees the three elementary characteristics distinguishing hypertexts or technotexts (as she calls it) from the conventional, i.e., fundamentally linear texts: "Hypertext has at a minimum the three characteristics of Multiple Reading Paths, Chunked Text, and some kind of Linking Mechanism to connect the chunks." N. Katherine Hayles, Writing Machines, Cambridge, London 2002, p. 26. The term Technotexts is also Hayles'. There is

meanwhile an almost unencompassable theoretical literature on hypertext; here I note solely such authors as George P. Landow, Stuart Multhorp, and Espen Aarseth and, in this country, Heiko Idensen. Dreyblatt worked closely together with Idensen on “Who’s Who”. See Dreyblatt, Hypertext und Erinnerung als Performance und Installation, pp. 274.
12) In his book “Picture Theory”, the picture theoretician W. J. T. Mitchell not only coined the term “imagetext”, he also underscored the close connection between this imagetext and memory: “Memory, in short, is an imagetext, a double-coded system of mental storage and retrieval.” And elsewhere he writes, “The composite imagetext structure of memory seems to be a deep feature that endures all the way from Cicero to Lacan to the organization of computer memory.” See W. J. T. Mitchell, Picture theory, Chicago 1994, pp. 192-93.
13) The sociologist Elena Esposito has promoted this three-level distinction: storage as a mere collection without any media to make it accessible; archive as storage plus access media; Internet as an access medium without storage. A student of Luhmann, she develops this idea in her book “Soziales Vergessen. Formen und Medien des Gedächtnisses der Gesellschaft”, Frankfurt am Main 2002. Here I follow Jan Assmann’s plainly critical summary in the book’s Afterword. Cf. there pp. 413.
14) Marshall McLuhan, Die Magischen Kanäle/Understanding Media, Dresden, Basel 1994, p. 22.
15) Here I refer to the American philologist Paul de Man and his book “Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism”, Oxford 1971. The paradoxical concept of unreadability also derives from his application of it to texts. Cf. Paul der Man: “Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust”, New Haven, London 1979.
16) The concepts of shock, trace, and track play a central role in Sigmund Freud’s speculative – and controversial – conceptions of the psychological apparatus, which he treats in his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”. Jacques Derrida refers to them in a number of his ideas, including in his aforementioned book on the archive.
17) The “mystic writing pad” or “magic slate” is a popular children’s toy on whose plastic surface one writes, the script pressing through to a wax tablet; if the plastic is pulled up, it separates from the wax and the script disappears. The slate can be inscribed anew. But traces and grooves are left from the original script. These are the “memory traces” Freud speaks of.
18) Arnold Dreyblatt, Hypertext und Erinnerung als Performance und Installation, p. 267.