

Hypertext and Memory in Performance and Installation

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Introduction: Beginnings

Over the last years I have been developing collaborative projects involving text, image and space that have been realized in a variety of forms, such as contemporary opera and interactive performance, installation, and publication. My work has touched on questions of memory, both collective and individual. In the process of de- and re-constructing a hypertext from these original materials, my attentions have grown to include the subject of archiving and storage itself, which seems to reflect on the current preoccupation, particularly in Europe, with the subject of Memory: what we choose to forget, what we choose to remember and the how, why, and where of storage and memorializing.

In 1985, I found a copy of *Who's Who in Central & East Europe* (1) in a used book store ("Beyoglu Kitapcilik Ltd.") near the Galanta Tower in Istanbul. These editions were the first and last biographical dictionaries to be published concerning this region exclusively until *Who's Who in the Socialist Countries of Europe* (2) was published in 1989. The introduction describes the book as a Biographical Dictionary containing about 10,000 authentic biographies of ecclesiastics, diplomats, civil servants, technicians, educators, military personnel, industrialists, journalists, painters, sculptors, authors, etc., from Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Danzig, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia..."

The Finding, dissection and reconstruction of this Memory Text has focused and fine-tuned my attentions into an obsession over the past decade. In attempting to read this work in countless ways, renovating its sense and form in order to make it new (3), a seemingly endless array of projects and ideas have been spurred, including the Gallery Installation, T: Aus den groen und kleinen Archiv; the publishing of my hypertext-book version of *Who's Who in Central & East Europe 1933* by Janus Press in Berlin (4); and performances throughout Europe of the Hypertext Opera *Who's Who in Central & East Europe 1933* and the site-specific interactive performance installation *Memory Arena*.

The Whos Who as Biographical Lexicon

A "Who's Who" is a twentieth century genre, which gives "brief, pertinent facts about many persons (generally those living at the time of the compilation of the dictionary), in alphabetical arrangement. Not only has it covered nations and geographical areas, it has also delved into every conceivably human activity, vocational and social." (5) The antecedent of the "Who's Who" is the biographical dictionary or compilation which seems to have played a greater role in the Islamic (Medieval Arabic and Persian literature) and ancient Chinese (biographical sections of Chinese dynastic histories) civilizations than it has within the Christian tradition. The European Biographical Dictionary came into its own during the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, reaching a peak in the publication of National Biographical Dictionaries during the development of Nationalism.

Who's Who in Central & East Europe 1933, as is generally the case within its genre, is a general biographical reference book with a rather straightforward organization of factual material. The alphabetically arranged biographies, ranging in length from a few sentences to half a page, are themselves divided into categories such as Name, Address, Birthplace, Birthdate, Married Status, Education etc. ending in an often fragmentary personal narrative of some sort. Yet under this structure lie buried layers of information not usually found in contemporary reference works of this type: revelations of a personal nature, intimate details, traces of desires and fears, life concepts and philosophies as well as references to major historical events. Though the majority of these entries are written in the second person singular, it is apparent that most were composed by the individuals themselves.

In comparison to a contemporary *Who's Who* or biographical dictionary there is found more substantial narrative and intimate information, fragmentary stories with unexpected twists and turns, such as, *In 1902 he became more interested in symbolism through a psychological breakdown.* or *"had to leave Moscow University because of the revolution or left the Peace Party when it declared itself for war and so on.* My imagination was continually stimulated by multiple layers of absurd and ambiguous information, intimate on the one hand and public on the other. I felt a desire to enter the two-dimensional world of the alphabetically organized page, three dimensionally building models of relation between the biographical fragments. One might travel through thousands of these fragments as if constructing a collective biography, a Biography of Everybody a la Gertrude Stein, who wrote in 1925: *There will then be a history of every one who ever is or was or will be living, mostly every history will be a long one, some will have a very little one, slowly it comes out of each one.*(6)

As I began to turn the pages of this book over ten years ago, I found myself within a complex network of personal and collective myth construction: a geo-political history of Central and Eastern Europe put together as if a puzzle from thousands of individual 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. From our present vantage point sixty years thereafter, having experienced the historical discontinuities of a world and a cold war, these expressions of vanity and self-assurance take on a compelling significance.

From Alphabet to Hypertext

By dredging and digging into (the book) new connections and references are made. It becomes a meeting point, almost a three dimensional thing. And your pick and shovel is the computer (7) At the beginning it was clear to me that in its strict alphabetical form, without indexing, this book would remain lifeless and incomprehensible. In attempting the creation of a new structure with which to process the biographical information, I gradually realized that what I had been searching for was not merely an indexing system, but rather a completely new model for organizing the text. The fundamental experience for me, when my approach to this text was initiated, was that of manually and randomly turning the pages of the book. As my

attention would form chance associations between fragments of text on adjoining pages, my roving eye would dart in all directions: there seemed to be endless points of relation between personal and historical micro-historical details. Surely no story or fragment was more important or poignant than any other. Here was a world without foreground or background, that seemed to exist in many dimensions and multiple layers. One would repeatedly fall upon points of communality between personal histories, all interconnected in place, time, or theme.

I had had no experience with digital data retrieval techniques, no programming knowledge to point to a simple solution. Yet it was clear to me from these beginnings that the solution would lie in non-linearity and intertextuality rather than in forging starring roles with beginnings and endings or in interpreting personal motivations and historical movement. Furthermore, the stories themselves were told in fragments reflecting haste in recollection and in translation (The texts were obviously translated quickly into English from over 18 languages for publication) as well as informing more in what is not said than that what is given. The narratives were fragmentary and did not constitute biography in the traditional sense. They seemed to represent the skeleton of biography, where we are presented with thousands of isolated details which tell us more about the limits of historical narrative and the moments of communality between micro- and macro-cosm than they do about individual persons themselves. A grain of sand is brought into focus for a moment before gradually disappearing into the collective sea of memory.

In the 1980s I had begun entering information on index cards, echoing the process in which the book was probably originally constructed. Yet the sheer amount of information which had to be entered, stored and accessed required an alternative method. It soon became clear to me that the only practical approach would lie in the application of data retrieval technology; reflecting the traditional use of the computer in the administration of personal data. One can think of no more successful and frightening a use of computerized data systems in the postwar age as in the storage and cross-referencing of personal information. It has seemed to me that with the transition from oral to written societies, there has arisen the replacement of an oral individual and collective memory with a written history and archive.

The extensive application of the ancient Art of Memory so well described by Frances Yates (8) has been replaced first by libraries and archives and now by ROM and RAM. Whereas the spatial characteristics of Memory were once collectively memorized but internally and individually stored, the development of the written word has externalized the process and the result. We search now in library stacks, desktop folders, and unix addresses for a meaning and a history. In 1990, I began the tedious steps in organizing the text materials within an hypertext architecture in which one could search and display connections and pathways through the thousands of individual stories.

My aim was not to rewrite history, but rather to re-invent it, in the sense of revitalization through the active participation of user and public. Rather than an ideological interpretation of major historical figures and movements, I would tell history through a micro-history of details and a juxtaposition of genealogical relations between fragments of memory: the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. The public, or user would thereby be forced to personally encounter both the public and his or her personal history and memory by an active encounter with the stuff that

history is made of, much as the historian as a paid professional sorts through myriad documents in archives for original sources. This preliminary work would thus involve extensive scanning, sorting and searching.

As a metaphor for this reorganization, I imagined a grid network in which verticality represents individual lifelines from birth to death (although in fact no one in this book dies, since at the moment of death one exits a *Who's Who*), while horizontality indicates the points and moments of communality and relationship between individuals. One might travel through one personal lifeline and then shift gears laterally in a kind of virtual meeting of chosen personalities in which one literally forges new paths through biographical narrative and recreates history.

The project beginnings was characterized by a long period of intensely studying and re-reading the entire book of over 1000 pages. During the initial stages I selected 765 whole or part biographies which have since been continually dissected and reconstructed in infinite variations. These biographies were in the main chosen for subjective reasons; reflecting my interest in revealing and juxtaposing hidden subtexts and relationships within spatial, temporal, and personal themes. While aiming for representative samples of chosen categories, my roving eye would be "caught" by tragicomic aberrations: mistakes, intensely personal revelations, impossible stories, marginal figures forgotten by history yet poignant with hindsight.

I largely concentrated my selections on the forgotten lives and the no longer famous; (though perhaps individual names might be familiar to East European specialists), whose forgotten voices seem to beckon us, both singly and in a polyphonic chorus as both an individual and a "collective" identity and fate. It is precisely this interrelationship of individual and collective memory that I have since tried to imply in the structures found in my ongoing work with this Ur-Text in various media. In the process of textual reorganization, I gradually realized that no objective, comprehensive cross section would be possible, and that finally only portions of text would survive, in endless formats and variations. In all my creative projects, this book has been treated as a found artifact and I have treated it as a cannonic or authoritative text: a "given" or "closed" text to which no commentary or interpretation may be added.

The Hypertext Opera

It was as a result of a commission from Rene Block of the DAAD in Berlin in 1990 to create a hypertext opera that this text-work had begun. The world premiere took place in 1991 as the finale of the "Inventionen" Festival in Berlin followed by additional performances in West and East Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. For the proscenium situation I created, in collaboration with American Designer and Director Fred Pommerehn, a simulation of a guided tour through a multi-layered data-well; a pre-chosen path through the text to be used as a digital libretto which would later become part of a production which included sound, stage and image. This simulated path would travel through historical and biographical themes: names, dates, ancestors, place names, histories, migrations, etc. forming a structure through which evolves in time. Projected texts and images were often in contrast to the spoken texts as in cut-up association and juxtaposition.

The simultaneous levels overwhelm the public, so that one is forced to make choices, to wander with ones attention from spoken to projected text, music, and documentary sound and images (derived from two archives of private found still and moving images in Budapest). This sensory overload also functioned as a metaphor in the development of the piece, which ends in a cataclysmic collapse in which computer text from the entire database seems to implode on the screen, as all text and image memories which one has experienced seem to pass ones vision. In the course of the one and a half hour performance, one might focus on a particular detail, perhaps a sentence or phrase which then grows in meaning in relation to another fragment; but gradually one is overtaken, for behind every one of these persons stand millions more, with their dreams and memories, obliquely connecting to events in historical time. The data bank of mankind is ungraspable. In the proscenium performance setting, we attempted to achieve an integration of text, image, light and sound that would be associative rather than interactive in the strictest sense.

Whereas true interactivity often rings of a simple cause and effect banality, a simulated interactivity allows for maximum predictive effect. Installation: The Great Archive With support from Kunstfonds e.V., Bonn in 1992-93, I created the installation "*T*": *Files out of the Great and Small Archives (T: Akten aus den großen und kleinen Archiven)* in the Ozwei Gallery in Berlin which focused many of my recurring interests and included the materials which I had been gathering during the preceding years under one roof. I had long been interested in moving beyond the proscenium space of the hypertext opera performance project and this indicated a new direction in installation as well as in performance.

This installation contained original historical archive documents, "text-objects" and video and has formed the conceptual basis for a number of installation/performance projects since. Influenced by use of the Data/Text projections in the Opera performance, I proposed to limit the installation to the display of texts in rooms: Text as Image. The installation would include no images, but would show related texts and documentation about Memory, History and Biography functioning as images, as objects and as information. Memory is not only a question of time, but that of a space for remembrance and archival storage. My interest in the connection between memory and the archive, which has since become more and more important in my work has derived from my years of experience in navigating through biographical and historical fragments within a computer architecture. One begins to perceive of information as spatial.

It is interesting that the so-called Art of Memory as practiced in its neo-platonic form in the Renaissance (9), at a moment when oral and written culture coexisted, represents the joining of image and memory in spatial terms as loci. As we recollect, we tend to locate our imaging of moments from the past in specific memory places. When we reconstruct a Memory from isolated moments, separating foreground from background, our remembering takes on spatial aspects. As Memory no longer sustains our identities, we use terminology like dislocation, displacement and dislodging to indicate our state of alienation and hidden and buried to describe the location of meaningful and often unobtainable knowledge.

In 1993 I built an object for this exhibition which I called the *Great Archive (Das Groe Archiv)*, in which I attempted to objectify hypertext as a three-dimensional image. A

small black box is divided by layers of texts which are illuminated from below. The texts were derived from the tens of thousands of biographical fragments which I have renovated from the *Whos Who in Central & East Europe*. As one peers into this sea of information, it is as if one stares into a bottomless well filled with layers of floating texts in depth. One focuses with ones eyes on any given text fragment on a given level, as the other text levels defocus and blur. Ones attention might wander to a deeper or nearer fragment, the eyes continually refocusing as one isolates and links a related or unrelated name or phrase. It was my intention here to realize, in three dimensions, a hypertext as a metaphorical space which contains in compressed form a database of all mankind.

The three rooms of this exhibition are all related to this object in theme and structure, delineating a logical path first through the metaphorical Small Archive and Great Archive, and The Storage of Memory. In the first and largest room, are found archive documents large text scrolls which contain Lists of fragmental details such as addresses and organizations which were sampled from the Whos Who database. These scrolls represent both an archaic form of writing, seemingly without a beginning and an end, as well as a sacred object with biblical overtones. In contrast to these objects implying a collective history, the documents trace the observation, recording and archiving of mistaken identity. Chronological selections from International Secret Service Archives document the life and times of a forgotten Central European historical figure whose multiple identities span three continents and touch on many of the most important events of the pre-war period.

In comparison to the collection of hundreds of individual stories upon which "Who's Who in Central & East Europe 1933" is based; the improbable but real life of "T" seems to include a collection of lifelines and events within one individual. These original archive documents were digitized and faked by specially developed printing techniques applied to the reverse side of Postwar East German archival pages, posing question about the identity of both the subjects personality and the documents themselves.

In a connecting space we find data presented on a track containing information on an international "high-tech" computer firm and an American church-sect (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) which is pursuing an extensive worldwide archiving project. The Church has been collecting and storing the personal data from over 15 Million persons from around the world for over 50 years in 1.6 million rolls of microfilm which are stored in Utah in the Western United States in a cave safe from nuclear attack. Each year 30,000 new rolls are added and the material is made accessible to the public at Family History Centers worldwide.

This project is the largest of its kind ever conceived, and as its goal seeks to collect store, and digitize all genealogically useful information which can be located before eventual disappearance. This project was the inspiration for the creation of the *Great Archive*. The Company has developed a robotic Mass Storage System in which files are ordered and physically moved by a robot monk/librarian which is further documented in a video detailing the self-destruction of a robotic mass data storage machine.

This installation built on my previous work in creating a hypertext from biographical and historical fragments, yet also included ideas and concepts which have since

become central to my work: text in space: the architecture of Memory and the use and storage of archival documents in reflecting the official traces of history and memory.

From Book to Book, A Journey in the Text

As the "libretto" of spoken and projected text utilized in the stage version represented only a small percentage of the material contained within the 765 chosen biographies, it had long been my desire to realize both a "paper" and an "electronic" version which would adequately present the complexity and depth of the original book. Parallel to presentations of this material in other media, I attempted to reflect the metaphor of "hypertext" and intra-linearity on paper for the publication of a book by Janus Press in Berlin (with support from Bild-Kunst, eV.)

The book, which took over two years in preparation, was published in early 1995. In creating a new groundwork, the original organization was revised extensively and lists of new keywords were created out of renewed readings of the biographies and through the use of search engines and word frequency analysis. The revised system of categories and newly created word lists were then used in creating the final text for this book. The process was one of "sifting" through and "whittling down" in a subtractive process which I liken to "mining for gold". Each fragment takes on varying meanings when presented within a different context. With word searches one throws the dice, each time turning up new and often unexpected gains of significance and colours of variation, dredging up more and more material, most of which must finally be thrown away to reveal the essence of a theme.

In conceiving of a basic visual and functional structure for this new book, I was greatly inspired by the printed form of the Jewish Talmud and of much Medieval Rabbinical Bible Literature. Here one finds, on a single page, central source texts from Torah surrounded by multiple peeled onion skin layers of often conflicting commentary and interpretation in an endless ongoing conversation carried out over centuries internationally. Excerpts and text fragments are often cross-referenced to related pages and topics in other sections and volumes. One has the sense of entering an information network of ever increasing complexity, in which all individual elements connect to each other in a kind of medieval hypertext. It a model which demonstrated to me a possibility for Hyper-textuality in two-dimensional book form. (Indeed, I have only recently discovered that much of this material is now being issued within a Hypertext structure by a computer software firms in the United States and Israel).

The result is a book which could perhaps be read from beginning to end in a linear fashion though it was designed with non-linear readings in mind. The Layout invites the Reader to scan topics, text fragments, and images (from my collection of private found photographs from Central & East Europe); and to take the initiative to follow cross-references or pure chance associations to other topics and to the multiple occasions where a given text fragment may appear in differing contexts. Multiple readings or navigations through the 765 biographies are therefore not only possible, but encouraged.

The text elements are divided into three parts each having their own locations in the layout: On the bottom of each page reference material from the 765 selected

biographies are printed in alphabetical and numerical order. Indications are given as to the pages on which these persons also appear as text fragments. In the main page body, text fragments from the 765 Biographies are arranged according to topic. Indications are given as to pages on which these persons also appear within other topics. In all cases, indications are given as to the pages on which persons appear throughout the book so that one may read a text vertically for content; or horizontally follow the connecting fragments which form a single biography from page to page.

The Arena of Memory

Through years of manually sifting these mountains of data in preparing the various projects I grew interested in presenting the living environment in which data is stored, archived and brought to life within a form which would involve the public. During a period spent researching the T Files at the British Public Record Office in London in early 1993, I was struck by the meeting of high-tech with the antiquated mounds of decaying paper file folders. Through a complicated bureaucratic system of monitors, runners, helpers and guards, digitally ordered files (often on parchment) were dug up in an unseen underground chamber, and then gradually transmitted with a human conveyor belt to the reader above, whose clip-on remote beeper noticed him that the file had arrived. This experience posed questions for me as to the role of bureaucracy and technology in collecting and storing our memories as well as in helping us to retrieving them.

In oral societies, what one could personally and collectively remember or historicize, that which has been called a living memory, could only be recollected through the recounting and repetition of traditions. Events only have meanings for the individual in so far as they inform the collective and confirm shared traditions and values. Vocal, musical, and visual imaginations acted as a living storage mechanism, fighting a continual battle against the fading away of information. Hence the importance of selection: not all information can be selected for retention; one could speak of a collective forgetfulness as well as a memory. Furthermore, in the circular time of oral societies, history is in a sense identical to memory and dreamworld, because any chronology of historical events is absorbed and reinterpreted into non-linear narrative, which serves the goals of collective meaning. Memory functioned to negotiate transitions from past to future.

With the advent of Manuscripts, the holy texts which form collective identity were written for the use of privileged elites, yet the islands of narratives which survived from pre-historical time were not corrected into the uniform timelines of what we now understand as History. In the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries there occurred an accelerating mania in the collection of artifacts and material records in spaces designed for access and display. These kabinetts, museums and archives were no longer repositories of shared values but of the objects supposedly representing them. The pseudo science of History accepts only the authority of documents to remember and interpret the past for us. The world can now only be understood through its external and often official vestiges and traces. The internal memory of self and mind, explored through psychological reflections by the analytical method mirrors the external one. We search and scan both our mind-selves as well as our physical and

virtual archives for buried meanings which may hold some sort of key to connect with what has been lost to us.

We attempt to fabricate a personal identity in historicizing our autobiography by scanning our memories and linearizing them, much as a historian re-constructs and reinterprets events in the past. But just as the rapid piling up of material records overwhelms the archivist and historian, so do our fractured selves have difficulty in assimilating the information overload of the postmodern age. We live only in short-term Memory and the linear narrative structures of the past seem inadequate in navigating and accessing our endlessly expanding long-term storage capabilities.

I began developing a concept for what later became Memory Arena in 1992 but it was not realized until February 1995 at Kampnagel Fabrik in Hamburg. This was followed by performances in October 1995 at Marstall/Bayerisches Staatstheater as part of the Spiel.Art Festival in Munich and an invitation to the Arken Museum of Modern Art to take part in Copenhagen 96, Cultural Capital of Europe. In Memory Arena, over six hundred readers, both invited and voluntary and representing all professional levels of the city-site participate in multiple simultaneous readings from individual files created out of Who's Who in Central & East Europe (now grown to over 1,000 pages) within a very precise temporal and visual environment.

In reflecting the past in the present, a politician might be given a text to read which concerns revolutionary figures in the Austro-Hungarian empire; a theater critic may be given a list of theater pieces or newspapers from Central and East Europe between the wars, a worker at the zoo might read a text about a director of a Zoological Institute, and so on. Crowds are first processed by over fifty bureaucratic hierarchical staff members through a labyrinth-like transit station, passing through numerous passageways, waiting and administration areas and related exhibitions.

The centerpiece is a fully operational Great Archive from which files are checked out and transported to be read aloud in the second space, the Arena. In the Arena, islands of individual memory remains which are physically and manually located in archival storage are brought out into the open within a vocalized collective forum. Here, a platform containing twelve reading stations covering three sides of the space surrounds the public who are able to choose between experiencing the collective space of simultaneous readings or moving in closer to observe the individual reawakening of specific texts, creating their own stories and interpretations. Administrators and his or her staff coordinate all personnel with the several hundred readers; making sure that each individual is in the correct place at the right time and that the events protocol is followed meticulously.

The functioning of this memory-machine-factory, a temporary institution in its own right, is made visible and coherent to the public by their participation in the inner-workings of the event. The hand-made files of the nineteenth century are contrasted with the digital database, as runners themselves manually carry information from place to place, chalk boards inform and telephones ring. In contrast, navigations through the data base are displayed on computer monitors throughout the complex, and texts are simultaneously projected on the Memory Arena Data Wall as they are read. Yet Memory itself remains in a pre-literate dreamtime as the autobiographical fragments are recanted, intoned and heard purely as unamplified sound in space, soon to be lost forever.

- 1 *Whos Who in Central & East Europe*, Central European Times Publishing Co., Ltd., Zurich; R.P.D. Stephen Taylor, Editor, 1935
- 2 Sauer Verlag; Juliusz Stroynowski, Editor, 1989
- 3 *Sensual Reality in the Mass Media*, Irving J. Weiss, in *McLuhan Pro & Con*, Edited by Raymond Rosenthal, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1968
- 4 *Whos Who in Central & East Europe 1933, Eine Reise in den Text*, Arnold Dreyblatt, Janus Press, Berlin, 1995 [Originally published in *Communication Arts Journal*, University of Southern California, 1997)