"The Hypertext Bible"

An interview between Hannah Hurtzig and Arnold Dreyblatt

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H.H.: You have made a media opera, composed several musical pieces, there has been an exhibition, a book will be published soon, you are preparing an installation, - everything in connection with this book 'Who's Who in Central & Eastern Europe 1933'. What kind of special quality mode this book a vein of gold for your artistic work, so that it become your personal bible?

A.D.: I have always been interested in personal stories, which have to do with personal dislocations. People who have parents from two different countries, personal histories in which one is transported through migrations of peoples or wars, the moment at which historical situations rupture one's life. My interest in this book, the bible as you said, is this collection of dislocated fragments. This book is a complex network of personal myth construction: a geo-political history of Central and Eastern Europe put together as if it were 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 no longer exist. But to take your question at a personal level, which I prefer to avoid, this interest also comes from third generation shock. I still feel as if I am suffering from the emigration of my grandparents.

H.H.: A shock?

A.D.: It's not a momentary shock, it's shock waves that pass through generations. Okay, I'll tell you a story: in the late seventies I inherited some money from a grandaunt of mine, I come from a very large family. I was going to use the money to produce my first LP and I wanted to write a little dedication to her. Her name is Mathilde Kaplan and she was a real favourite of mine. She never married and she was the fool of the family, an old communist, she liked Elvis Presley very much in her nineties. Anyway, Kaplan was her name, but I knew that it was not her family name, so I asked my mother. She said: 'Well, her name is not really Kaplan, but she came across the ocean with the Kaplans." 'Well, what was her name before that?" "Lentin," she answered. "So, I'll write Lentin." "No!" she said, "That's just the name they wrote when they came into this country, the border officials couldn't write the real name." "So, what's the real name?" "Lancewicki or something like that." "Okay, then I'll write down Lancewicki." "No, that's not right either. That's just the name of a dead

Polish soldier, that your grandfather took so he wouldn't have to go into the Tsar's army." And it went on and on like this, and finally I realized there was no real Christian name, since the Jews had their own Hebrew names but just took on these Christian names because they were forced to. They didn't take it seriously. They don't really care either. I asked also about my grandfather's name. We found his papers. My grandfather was a very tall man and on his immigration papers they had made him two feet shorter and it said that he came from Rumania, but he came from Russia. So I asked him: "What's this, it's the wrong birthplace, wrong height, wrong eye-colour." He said: "Well, the guy queueing in front of me on the line wrote this down and he got through, so I copied his papers." There is this kind of thorough ambivalence towards every kind of identification, so that the authorities would not understand. It says in the Babylonian Talmud, when an agent of the government comes to your door wherever you live, don't talk to him, don't have anything to do with him.

H.H.: You don't add anything to the stories in this book and you are not filling in the gaps with your own narration. And there is no autobiographical approach in your work and your treatment of the book.

A.D.: I associate this autobiographical narration with confession, which I find dangerous, as it involves self-interpretation. For me the book is a found artefact and I've treated it as a 'canonic text' or a 'given' or 'closed' text to which nothing may be added. Using a computer, I dissected and reconstructed thousands of biographical fragments which I selected. I wanted to simulate a 'guided tour' through pathways in an architecture of biographical information. What's unusual about this 'Who's Who', is that the individuals themselves wrote their own biographies instead of the editors. What interests me is: when one has the chance to be in a book like this, what is one telling about oneself? In comparison to contemporary 'Who's Who' or biographical dictionaries there is more narrative or intimate information, a kind of fragmental story, such as: "In 1902 he became more interested in symbolism through a psychological breakdown." Something personal is revealed through this ridiculously rigid structure, a sentence like "thrown out of the window by socialist workmen in Steiermark" or "the first female librarian in Poland" jumps out and hits your face. I was looking for this kind of absurd and ambiguous information, intimate on the one hand and public on the other. And I had a particular interest for what I call forgotten provinces and minority groups. I have largely concentrated my selection on the forgotten lives and the 'no longer famous'.

H.H.: So Freud doesn't appear?

A.D.: Not in my chosen 765 biographies.

H.H.: You treated the material almost in a 'democratic way'. There are no protagonists, it's more like everybody in the crowd has the chance to raise his voice.

A.D.: I've been reading this material over and over again and I almost start to hear it like a polyphony of voices: forgotten voices which call out to us both singly and in a kind of polyphonic chorus as both an individual and a collective memory and fate. It is this interrelationship between the individual and the collective that I have tried to imply in my ongoing work with this same book, the 'Ur-Text' in different mediums. One can travel within these thousands of fragments and see them as the biography of one person who was everywhere. There are wonderful old American gospel songs and it also appears in a sort of folk song from the British Isles, about a figure who had lived throughout time. Something like: I walked with them out of Egypt to the promised land, I was there when Caesar crossed the Rubicon, I was there when Jesus Christ was crucified... etc.. 'Sympathy for the devil' by the Rolling Stones is also based on these traditional songs.

H.H.: The rereading and reworking, reorganizing and reconstructing of the book is based on a computer Hypertext Programme. The 'Who's Who' book is made in a linear alphabetical order of course. By dredging and digging into it new connections and references are mode. It becomes a meeting point, almost a three-dimensional thing. And your pick and shovel is the computer.

A.D.: In the beginning I started to work with index cards, which was probably similar to the way the book was originally constructed. While I was struggling with these index cards, the idea of organizing the material by computer was suggested to me by a friend. The 765 biographies which I chose were transcribed from paper book to data base program, within the structure of categorical 'fields'. The data base was then transferred into a 'Hypertext Program', an information architecture was programmed in which fragments from each biography could be stored and linked to each other. I have an image for this work, like a cross. Vertically you have the personal history from birth to death (in fact no one in this book dies, but there is always an imaginary point of no return) and horizontally one finds the points where this lifeline might have met another lifeline. You travel through one person's life vertically and then you might change gears and shift over to another person. I create kinds of virtual moments of meeting between these people. Figures in the book have a chance to discuss their optimistic visions of the future! My interest in archives in general, which has

become more and more important in my work, derives from this experience: navigating through biographical and historical fragments in a computer architecture. The information is spatial. My new work 'Memory Arena' will be a kind of living installation in which the public participates by stepping into the brain, the great archive and the great data bank. Hundreds of invited readers read sections from the 'bible', the 'Who's Who', within a very precise temporal and visual environment which is reminiscent of almost dreamlike situations. The crowds are processed through a labyrinth-like transit station and can spend their time in a number of different spaces with different functions. It is my first departure from the proscenium.

H.H.: In a way you are rewriting and reinventing a given book again and again. What kind of an obsession is that?

A.D.: The Talmud enquiry is exactly that, an endless reinterpretation and discussion and argument from a given text, which can't be altered. You can't change one letter from the Torah, it has to be copied exactly. On a single page, central _source' texts from the Torah are surrounded by multiple 'peeled onion skin' layers of often conflicting commentary and interpretation in an endless ongoing conversation carried out internationally over centuries. Commentaries are cross-referenced to related pages and topics in other sections and volumes. I have the feeling of entering an information network of ever increasing complexity, in which all individual elements connect to each other in a kind of medieval 'hypertext'. In the last two years, there have been some Hypertext versions of the Talmud for computer, in which one can make use of the immense cross-referencing possibilities in the Talmud. My work and reorganizing of this book is looking and finding, crystallization or distillation of the material. It's often like sifting for gold, but the idea of completeness of course is never reached.

H.H.: In your exhibition there is an installation dealing with the Mormon Church. What is your interest in them?

A.D.: The Mormons believe in their interpretation of Christian teaching that those who have died can still be saved by a baptism in substitution, which Mormons are as often as possible required to perform. All members of the church are encouraged to research their own family history and particular Mormons devote themselves to the work of a multibillion-dollar worldwide programme to collect and copy marriage records, birth records, any type of written information which could have personal information. Their interest is to determine through the

analysis of these records whether a particular person has actually lived so that the Baptism ritual can be performed to save the souls of the dead. So this fantastic mania for collecting personal information is connected to an ancestor worship ritual, repeated over and over again. The agents who travel the globe collecting this information use a specially invented copying camera with a foot control and the copies are all sent to Salt Lake City for analysis. The general archive is open to the public and microfilms can be ordered from Mormon centres around the world. The full archive is kept in a specially climate-controlled building in the mountains outside Salt Lake City, with doors that close in the event of an earthquake or nuclear war. Multiple copies are kept for all eternity. If one is interested in personal data collection and what remains of all the individuals that have lived on earth, this is the ultimate creative work! In Germany I gave some lectures about my work and the Germans were always horrified by this image of data collection by the Mormons, because of what happened during the Nazi period and the use of data collections. But I'm in awe of this work.

H.H.: Are you yourself an enthusiastic collector and archivist?

A.D.: I collect documents and objects in the same way that I scanned the text of the 'Who's Who': finding and stopping. Some of my material I find half blind in dark little shops with absolutely insane collections of papers and rubbish. I'm not motivated to collect just to have things, to have all the copies of a given thing. I'm also not a very well-organized type so perhaps in a way my work expresses the opposite of my personality.

H.H.: Do you spend a lot of time in archives or libraries? Do you have a favorite one?

A.D.: Yes, the Public Record Archives in London. In this huge modern building outside London where you may find the majority of all material collected by the British Empire from its beginning till the fifties. When it opens at 9 o'clock in the morning a crowd of a hundred people, historians, are already waiting outside, and when the doors open everybody rushes upstairs and orders his first files, because there's not much time till 4 o'clock in the afternoon when it closes. The idea is then to keep a kind of rhythm going so that new files will always come up when you're finished with the last one. There are computer terminals and an army of helpers to guide you through a very complicated process of research in which you almost need lessons and constant help. Giant rooms, lots of tables, and you hear all these beeping people running in and out as they are called back by electric beepers attached to their clothing when their files are coming up, as all the material is kept underground. You may watch this beautiful mechanism from the top floor: it's almost like a metaphor for memory.

And there is this archive and library of the Eastern European Jews in New York. Before the war it was in Vilnius and somehow they managed to get it out. This is a disorganized archive. The first time I came there I asked the little old lady from Poland to tell me how it works and she said: "The roof is leaking, the card catalogue is incomplete, we don't have any money to pay people, maybe we will be thrown out of the building, but who's complaining." But being in a library seems like a vacation. The world makes me nervous, libraries don't.