

"Lost Texts" Arnold Dreyblatt

"(...) I became fascinated by the perception of figure and ground in a textual field. I tend to present enormous amounts of textual material in my work which can never be grasped as a whole. Our perceptual apparatus needs a branch to hold onto, we grab a fragment, a name, or a phrase, which is then lost as we are forced to let go of the branch. We find ourselves in the forest again, but only until our attention roams again. It is this process of finding and loss, and the associations that connect these locations, which is at the center of my work."¹

Since living and working in Germany since 1984, my artistic practice has been preoccupied with the collection, visualization and vocalization of historical archival source material which refers and resonates to larger themes of memory, history, storage, preservation and cultural loss. The resulting research projects have been realized in a vast variety of artistic formats over the last thirty-five years: such as contemporary opera and interactive performance, art installation, public art and publication in book and digital media.

The evolutionary process in developing each artistic project has involved extensive research in information gathering and analysis, often in collaboration with archival and historical institutions, as commissioned, as self-generated or as found content. Examples have included a forgotten biographical lexicon of 10,000 individuals from Eastern and Central Europe from 1933; a data record documenting discussions between professional archivists; a chronic of events during the operation of a woman's concentration camp or a collection of documents referencing the ethics and misuse of personal data registration systems. Performative projects as large-scale staged multi-day events have functioned as temporary archival systems where the visitor is invited to actively participate in the archival process, to consult a catalog, request documents or to review the results of digital data streams and searches on screens and projections in a re-imagining of a "reading room" as a "living archive". In such projects the fundamental rule of silence is breached, as participants unexpectedly read out-loud from their documents, an intrusion into the archive by means of a live voice, effectively forcing the archive into a communicative role as contemporary discourse.

Positioned at the intersection of materiality and the informational, at once documentation and simulation – my inquiry has questioned the representability of historical knowledge along with formats of information storage and access. In 1980's, I became interested in new structural models for processing archival information which led to research into "hypertextual networks" and "inter-textuality" in imagining non-hierarchical correlations

¹ - "Without the presence of the past, we are without consciousness", Arnold Dreyblatt: "From the Archives", Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2003

between data and media. These underlying database structures, themselves a non-narrative compilation of data in navigating history, has become a foundation of my work and continues to inspire my approach.

As my practice most often involves the perception and interaction of multiple textual layers, I have been greatly influenced by the printed format of the traditional Jewish Talmud and of much Medieval Rabbinic Bible Literature. Here one finds, on a single page, central "source" texts from the Torah as "Ur-Text" surrounded by multiple layers of often conflicting commentary and interpretation in an endless ongoing conversation carried out over centuries internationally. Excerpts and text fragments are 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 an ancient "hypertext".

The traditional function of the memorial is to regulate and stabilize identity and history, yet my practice counters with a destabilizing effect in giving voice to the incomplete, the marginal, the overlooked detail which threatens the authority of a single narrative. The viewer is overwhelmed with textual information, and one is perceptually forced to select a textual fragment, only to "loose the thread" and be propelled to begin again, participating in a process of finding and forgetting.

The book burnings in Germany during May 1933 were carried out by the anti-Semitic "German Student Union" in many cities as part of the "Action Against the Un-German Spirit" and were the prelude to the systematic removal of all literature not acceptable to the National Socialists from libraries, bookstores, and literary publishing. In Munich there were two book burnings on May 6 and 10 on the Königplatz. In 2016, after years of discussions, the Munich City Council finally decided to commemorate the National Socialist book burnings in public space.

It has now been almost five years since I first stood on the Königplatz in Munich after having been invited to participate in a competition to design a memorial in commemorating the burning of books on this site. Now - eighty-nine years after the barbaric destruction of countless books and the systematic persecution of many authors, the resulting memorial entitled "The Black List" is a textual intervention that evokes the traces of an erased culture along with the collective recognition of a lost world.

My concept for „The Blacklist“ recognized the historical architectural symmetry of the „Königplatz“ as a site for pedestrian visitors as well as in its use for summer festival activities. I proposed a work which is clearly visible and aesthetically compelling as a marking of the historical location of the book-burning while seamlessly integrating into the topographical landscape without radical modification. "The Black List" was centrally placed within the semicircular area before the steps of the "State Collections of Antiquities" on the presumed historical site of the book-burning. The artwork consists of two semi-circular concrete floor slabs, approx. 8 m diameter, with a spiral of approx. 9,600 letters, each of which is recessed approx. 2 mm. The concrete has been colored to match the historical stone of the neighboring historical buildings on the Königplatz. An information panel contains a short description of the

work and is linked to the website of the NS-Documentation Center in Munich, where all authors and book-titles can be found along with relevant historical context.

The title of the artwork refers to the so-called "black list" of objectionable literature compiled by the National Socialist librarian Dr. Wolfgang Herrmann in the spring of 1933. Although the exact titles of the books burned at this site are unknown, we know from historical research that the organizers of the book burnings were originally guided by this list.

I did not wish to create merely a symbolic statement marking "absence" - nor did I wish to include a "list of names" as in many other well-known memorials marking the 1933 book-burnings and other historical events of National Socialism. Rather, I chose to focus on a textual intervention based on the "lost books" in invoking the active destruction of knowledge and culture through recitation. From each of the 310 banned authors I selected the last publication published either before (or including) the year 1933. Presented without punctuation, this continuous spiraling litany of revealing titles forms a poetic window into the political, economic, scientific and literary themes of the time period. The words and textual fragments collide and actualize new meanings for us today as we perceive and interact with the memorial. Navigating the surface of the work itself, the texts actively rotate from a central axis as our perception jumps to and from text fragments in a pro-active reading. The spiral, a plane curve generated by a point moving around a fixed point, is one of mankind's most ancient symbols, and it is found in historical and contemporary cultures throughout the world. The spiral of smoke and burning pages, depicted in the rare images of the book-burnings that exist, inspire the spiral-like dynamic movement of spinning text fragments, now permanently inscribed.

As we memorialize and subsequently internalize this historical erasure, we also activate these selected book-titles as a new and living text. The process of remembering is also one of renewal and participation, metaphorically saving the books and their authors from oblivion. It has been my great satisfaction to witness the dance-like movements of exploration by the public during the process of reading and decoding this endless text. Indeed, "The Black List" provides us with a window into the intellectual and cultural preoccupations and achievements of a forgotten era rather than its immanent final destruction. Though we mourn, we must also celebrate what the National Socialists wished to erase.

The deliberate destruction of books and libraries, and thus the targeted erasure of cultural and scientific knowledge for future generations, is not limited to the commemorations of the book burnings in the Third Reich. The publicly staged destruction of knowledge and culture through the symbolic act of book bannings and burnings has been morally, religiously and politically motivated throughout the ancient world, and continues today in the willful and wanton destruction of a cultural memory along with that of human beings.

Libraries are sites for memory and the storage of knowledge. They are designated spaces for preservation, and since the invention of printing and the founding of the public library, they have been sites of communication and democratic accessibility.

The librarians and archivists represent professions with which society trusts the preservation of the past - the "keepers" of knowledge and culture for future generations. With the formulation of his "blacklist", a librarian who had been educated in methods of conservation used this position of power to erase and condemn. Let this be a warning for the future: let the books of the libraries speak with many voices, from many places and times. Let there be more letters, more words than we can ever read.

As Yosef Haim Yerushalmi wrote in 1982:

"(...) I am on the side of "too much" rather than "too little", because my terror of forgetting is greater than my terror of remembering too much (...) May the flood of collected facts about the past continue to swell, may the books and monographs pile up even higher, even if only specialists read them. May many copies lie unread in many libraries, so that they still exist when they are destroyed elsewhere. So that those who are called may later be able to ascertain: This person really lived, these events really took place, this interpretation is not the only one."²

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² - Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zahor, Jewish History & Jewish Memory*, 1982