Memory Arena

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Arnold Dreyblatt, an American artist based in Berlin, has been working on a series of projects--an opera, a book, installations, multi-media performances--that raise fascinating questions about biography, memory, and all the ways in which we recollect and interpret the traces of other lives. Several years ago, Dreyblatt found a copy of *Who's Who in Eastern and Central Europe in 1933* in a store in Turkey. He has taken entries from this volume (published in Switzerland) to create a database and an archive that have served as the basis for many forms of reassemblage. Recently, he has produced multi-media performance installations--entitled *Memory Arena*--in various European cities, and these productions consist of more than a dozen modes of presenting and animating this and other archival material, and include exhibitions about archives as well. The primary spaces in *Memory Arena* are a fully operational "Archive" (a repository of all the biographical files, which can be checked out by any visitor), and the Arena, a hall with twelve reading stations where one can listen to and watch readings of these biographical fragments (the lines being read are also projected simultaneously on a Data Wall, almost like a stock ticker). Each reader is given a text composed of pieces of the *Who's Who* entries relevant to a particular rubric, such as a Profession, Travels, Education, Parents, or Conferences, and the person reads for a specific number of minutes. The installations also contain many other forms and spaces of biographical representation: video, slides, computer terminals, web sites, music, an isolation booth where can see nothing but only hear the readers, and so on.

I will discuss what I take to be some of the most radical and challenging aspects of this work: the cutting up of a "life story" into the most minimal of fragments, and then the collective reassemblage of these elements of a "life" under a plethora of categories and lists, and their "revivification" through various acts of reading. I especially want to consider the mixed media, hybrid, and performative aspects of *Memory Arena*, in contrast to the written form in which I first encountered Dreyblatt's work--his own book *Who's Who in Central and Eastern Europe 1933*. I was completely unprepared for the ways in which this fascinating production further challenged my understanding of the tensions between individual and collective identity, private and communal forms of remembrance, fragmentation and restoration, and presence and loss. As a way to focus these reconsiderations, I will also question some of the performative and participatory dimensions of *Memory Arena*--what happens when one begins to pick out fragments, to read them, and to hear, in their isolation and in their concatenation with other fragments, the possibility of narrative and deviation, the reverberations and deflections of language and life at their most minimal level? What happens in the slippage from spectator to reader, from looking at to participating in the workings of an archive? And what happens when one is in turn inscripted, and drawn into a symmetric relationship with these traces from a region so violently transformed in the intervening years? To help frame these questions, I will begin by rehearsing some of my comments about his earlier, written work, in order to provide a point of departure for thinking through the implications and possibilities raised by *Memory Arena.*

Each entry in a Who's Who presents only the barest traces of a life. Written in the present (one drops out of Who's Who when one dies), the book elevates all who are included to the status of "important people," but in turn reduces everyone to a few

sparse facts of birth, education, accomplishments, and place of residence. Although a Who's Who contains the minimalist essence of biography, it challenges the pretense of any biographical project, as its listing of thousands of names undoes any illusion of absolute difference and individuality. Even the variances between one entry and another fall into patterns. A Who's Who depends on the myth of biography--that a story could be expanded from each entry that would capture the unique essence of the person--even as it assaults this myth, reducing a life to its smallest dimension, and repeating this reduction almost endlessly, so that the great moments in a life are nearly interchangeable, as each person becomes an entry hopelessly unable to escape from its companions.

A Who's Who of sixty-five years ago is a forlorn object, having lost its functionality and no longer able to depend on the lives and the memories that could resurrect its skeletal references. Arnold Dreyblatt's Who's Who in Central and East Europe 1933 extends the logic of the traditional *Who's Who*. Rather than seeking to recover the past by pretending that each entry, like a dried and condensed paper flower, only awaits the water of the historical imagination to bloom again, Dreyblatt continues the inexorable fragmentation of the *Who's Who*, splitting each entry into its components, and reweaving them into new constellations. The importance of the surname, as the unique means of alphabetical ordering, gives way to a plethora of categories and lists: ancestors, teachers, expeditions, languages, philanthropy, professions, minorities, disappeared provinces, -isms, revolutions, personal philosophies, and more than a hundred other topics.

Each life is separated into the pieces by which we construct our understanding of what a life might be. The uniqueness of the individual gives way to the generalizing categories by which even the concept of the individual comes into being. The book literally deconstructs biography, revealing the scaffolding, the series of categories, that underlies each figure, even as it reconnects the pieces into new patterns, which still remain just beyond our reach. The splitting of the biographical entries, the repetition of so many examples, and the restriction to only the most basic of elements (to the building blocks of the original words of the *Who's Who*), defy every attempt to recover or re-create a past world in its totality. Instead, there is a revelation of the possibility that each little fragment can be caught in a net, that each detail, no matter how sparse, can be rewoven into another fabric. And even more strikingly, the book releases a potential in each fragment.

The continual way in which each entry, despite a common context, fails to repeat the others opens an almost infinite horizon, even as it fixes each person along the various grids of the chapter headings. This is the real power of the work: the displacement of "biography" from the unique story of someone who has achieved prominence in a career and has entered into the imagination of the public, to the fragments themselves, the building blocks, ordinary and yet extraordinary, through which every "life" is constructed.

These fragments, these phrases providing only the briefest descriptions of each person's activities, are the public traces of lives. We are presented with none of the actual artworks, achievements, or adventures of these people, but only with their notation in a public record, in a *Who's Who*. The traces themselves do not possess an "aura" of unique existence, nor do they function as a successful synecdoche that would allow us to resurrect the inner mind of the person. Dreyblatt's project adheres

to the external, the public, even the bureaucratic representation. In a more typical project of historical memory, we move (if awkwardly) from the found to the lost; from, perhaps, some remaining evidence of an interesting person or event, to an imaginary re-creation of their story. Here, the public trace is made to suffice; we are forced to confront these minimal details, rather than to use them as mere stepping stones to our own fantasy of a richer, earlier life.

The mode of so much recent work is to offer a gesture of resistance to the bureaucratization of modern society, by attempting to promote an alternate notion of identity. This often involves a retreat from the public to the private (to go from the *Who's Who* to the interior life of an individual), to an ethnic or communal heritage (resurrecting a fading tradition), or to the autobiographical (recovering the past by linking it in some way to one's own personal history). Dreyblatt's project, in contrast, maintains its edge--and its importance for the rethinking of identity, history, culture, and memory--by refusing to retreat from or transcend these public, archival traces.

I want now to push these ideas further, since I think the multiple dimensions of repetition of *Memory Arena* call into question, if not explode, some of the habitual axes of interpretation or structuring oppositions for theorizing life-writing. In this production, where one is invited or required to read, to speak, to hear, to check out, to be processed by a bureaucratic apparatus, and to confront distortions of time (*Memory Arena* time is not Real Time--at intervals, a band begins to play, all other activity shuts down, and all the clocks stop--so that by the end of the evening, the "time" by which everything operates is significantly off from one's watch), the bio-fragments reverberate beyond any stable localization or origin. I particularly want to put into question the dimension or pole of "restoration," which structures so many thoughts on subjectivity and biography, whether in opposition to fragmentation (where we get a dynamic of part and whole, and a thinking of how to move from one to the other), or in opposition to privation (often as a dynamic of loss and presence, or of past and present). For shorthand purposes of exemplifying the functioning of "restoration," I'll refer to Frederic Jameson's famous essay on "Postmodernity," and Paul de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-Facement."

Jameson argues that the postmodern "subject" can be characterized by fragmentation, and he elaborates:
If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity . . . to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory. These are, however, very precisely some of the privileged terms in which postmodernist cultural production has been analyzed (and even defended, by its own apologists). They are, however, still privative features.

The horizons of Jameson's critique, in reaction to this loss of "coherent experience" are restorative, situating the fragmented subject temporally and geographically: through "a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History" (46), and through an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" that would "endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system". The cultural productions of postmodern subjects may remain "heaps of fragments," but the critic will be able to overcome these "privative features," thereby restoring our ability to act (rather than merely to judge moralistically).

Dreyblatt's work could be considered as the representation of the "subject" as a "heap of fragments," but I want to suggest that the performative force of the inscription, concatenation, reading, manipulation, and redisplay of these bio-fragments deflects us away from a logic of fragment and whole, and away from the usual categories of historical knowledge, by which a fragment gains meaning through its subsumption into a larger framework, whether of an individual life, a political movement, a social transformation, or a snapshot of an era. These bio-fragments become threads, openings, traces, possibilities, yet lead to no telos, no restorative, familiar category of "coherent experience." For example, a list of biographical fragments referring to political affiliation does little to give us any picture of, say, a Socialist movement in eastern Europe. Yet in reading or hearing this selection, or in following the lines in one of the many forms of inscription--a large scroll, a lighted cube with multiple layers of text, a card catalogue for the Archive--we are always given further links, further concatenations, further references and cross-references, further possibilities of narrative. But each statement of a few aspects of a life ends too soon--we are given a narrative that refuses to satisfy the expectations of narrative.

Yet we are presented with something far different than "a practice of the randomly heterogeneous . . . and the aleatory." What then connects one entry and the next? What logic, what narrative, what geography, or what history? There are many responses, but we must supply them, and must continue to ponder, without any possibility of arriving at a "restored" category or picture that we are in any sense familiar with, the logic of all our categories and apparatuses of connection, both narrative and bureaucratic, aesthetic and conceptual. In our practices of reading in *Memory Arena*, what is restored, in other words, is always different from, other than, what has been "lost."

Each biofragment is inscripted, repeated, almost sacralized, yet the non-ironic attentiveness to these very processes of memorialization opens up endless reverberations and questions, rather than the usual effects of awe, silence in the face of the dead, and unknowability. The simple yet ritualistic readings displace the customary oscillation between heaped fragments and an unrestorable "wholeness" of lived experience. The act of reading the name (and story) of someone dead, and of addressing the past from the present, includes both an aspect of restoration--a prior life is inserted into the fabric of the present--and a threat of privation--the recognition of one's own (future) inability to speak, one's own reduction to a voiceless name). Paul de Man, in "Autobiography as De-Facement," concludes: "autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores." Giving voice to a name always also articulates the irreducible gaps in self-presence and self-knowledge that the speech act seeks to bridge, and thereby dis-figures the very figures of the self that are spoken. The biographical gesture of reading the name and the story of another, when pushed to its limits--or in this case, when stripped to its summary and incantatory notations--discloses that our own wholeness is composed from figures that always also take away what they seek to give.

Reading names and fragments of lives, especially from places that have seen gone through such violent upheavals in the last 60 years, is a powerful experience. One partakes of this haunting interchange between past and present, and part of the

attraction of *Memory Arena*, for Germans especially, is this contact with what has been eradicated. I want to suggest, however, that *Memory Arena* disturbs the usual logic of commemoration, in which restoration and privation remain opposite sides of the same act. The reverberations of multiple voices draw attention away from a direct and personal relation of past and present. The staging of readings (the bureaucratic process, with multiple clerks who control the spaces where people read into a microphone) makes us aware that all our desires to remember are always already staged, performed within an arena; the performative force of reading a name or biofragment--its powers of evocation, suggestion, and commemoration--depends on such staging. The multiple layers of time explode any logic of iteration, by which one might clearly separate an original event from its repetition. One example: the "protocol," a gigantic chalkboard on which the current reader's profession is written alongside the category, sometimes a professional one, of the biofragments to be read, confuses the boundary between the reading and the archival person. Moreover, the potential interchangeability of present and past is dramatized by the contrast between the archaic technology of the "chalkboard" used to display the present order of events and the digital light board used for displaying the "original" texts as they are read--the "present" event has an aura of an earlier era, while prior lives are made legible via cutting edge technology. Altogether, *Memory Arena* provokes us to rethink all the dynamics of "restoration" that underlie every project of life-writing.

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