Questionnaire 2

Interview with Arnold Dreyblatt, in: Performance Research, On Archives and Archiving, 7 (4), Devon 2002

- *Do you keep an archive of your work?*

This is a complex question for me to answer. My work is concerned itself with the subject of archives - a collection which in its presentation refers and resonates to larger themes of memory, history, storage, preservation and cultural loss. The work poses questions about the nature of the contemporary archival process: what is chosen for storage, and what "falls through the cracks" of selection by "acts of god" or by economic, and political decision-making.

Therefore I find myself responsible for maintaining two archives which I will henceforth refer to as the "Content" or "C" Archive and the "Documentation or "D" Archive: that is, an archive which documents my work and an archive which contains content materials for my projects.

There are of course "porous seams" which border and overlap these collections, and which allow a certain degree of interactivity between them.

- *If so, what sorts of things have you kept, and what sorts of things have you thrown away? How were these choices made? Do you now regret having thrown away anything?*

Content Archive:

My Archive originated with the finding of the biographical lexicon entitled "Who's Who in Central & East Europe" (1933) in an used book store in Istanbul in 1985. To this central archival content additional complimentary data sources have continued to be added over the last 15 years, often in the process of developing new artistic presentations. The holdings of my archive are mostly text-based, reflecting a fascination and obsession with a navigation through a data architecture, through fields and three dimensional spaces of textual fragments and an simulation of the "sifting" and "finding" process.

The classifications of content in this archive ranges from original "found" archival documents, compendiums of biographical material, to phrases, definitions, and explanatory yet bureaucratic material relating to the archival process from a psychological (internalized) and cultural (externalized) viewpoint. The "Finding", dissection and reconstruction of these "Memory Texts" has focused and fine-tuned my attentions into an obsession over the past 15 years. My aim has

not been to rewrite these texts, but rather to re-vitalize them through newly conceived contextual and spatial display and the active participation of user and public.

Documentation Archive

Whereas the "Content" archive has developed systematically from its inception, the "Documentation" archive has had a rather arbitrary history. Whereas materials in the "Content" archive have been kept and protected relatively intact, the "Documentation" archive has suffered from early neglect, with much materials having been lost over the years, especially documenting my early activities in New York in the late 1970's. One tends only to begin systematic collection only when retrieval suddenly and unexpectededly fails: or to put it another way: memory awareness begins with a sense of loss.

The "D" archive contains a large section of magnetic tapes. I began "baking"[i] my early Audio magnetic tapes for a CD project in the 90's, which included migration to digital media. Mysteriously, many of the early half-inch videotapes seem to be playable, but are awaiting funds for costly copying costs.

General Statement:

I regret the fact that there are items which are currently in my possession, but which, unbeknownst to me at the current time, will undoubtably be discarded or destroyed in the future!

- *Where is your archive kept? How is it kept (in boxes, files, notebooks, videos, computer disks, CD-Roms)? How is it organized (alphabetically, chronologically, according to performance, theme or ideas)?*

"C" Archive

Each Archive division is treated differently as to the selection process, storage media, data format, etc. Where possible, I have generally considered a phase of digital storage as a suitable goal before selection, categorization and final display. Maintaining as much material as possible in digital form allows maximum flexibility in terms of later treatment and presentation. The texts are gradually entered into a database, which has been specially structured for the particular nature of the respective data. This initial process, including entering, categorization and database programming has taken from weeks to years, depending on the condition and size of the data, as well as on the financial funding available.

I usually choose a particular data source (book, database, subject matter, etc.) with an end result in possible final presentation in mind. Additionally, I take into account the complimentary aspect

of a particular material in relation to the content and structure of the other archival holdings in my possession before considering acquisition. I see the selection and categorization process as the application of an almost institutional administration on the data which allows retrieval, access and treatment. Systems of categories are revised extensively and lists of "keywords" are created out of repeated readings and through the use of "search engines" and linguistic word frequency analysis. The process has been one of searching and scanning: pathways were thereby created through otherwise indecipherable texts. The thousands of pages of "found fragments" are then "sifted" through and "whittled down" in a subtractive process which I liken to "mining for gold". On the other hand, this process is never completed and can only be artificially "canonized" as a completed collection. The possible re-organizations of this material is physically and philosophically endless and infinite, only limited by time, funds, methodologies and technologies.

"D" Archive

The administration of documentation is a continual process, competing for my attention with the development of current and future projects. Over the years, the organization process has changed repeatedly, sections of the archive are catalogued as to: project, year, alphabet, whether "current" or "history", and so on. A section of files containing reference materials are catalogued by theme. I am generally more successful at maintaining consistency in the "Content" archive than I am with the administration of my own artistic autobiography.

- *Do you ever consult your own archive?*

I am constantly consulting both archives, - for both external and internal use – that is, for my own and in answering external requests. Archivists in state institutions who are concerned with acquisition, generally try to imagine whether an item would be relevant hundreds of years into the future. Unfortunately, when dealing with one's own artistic documentation, one often has difficulty imagining a future; and one is often surprised what seemingly insignificant materials develop importance with time.

- *Do you open your archive to other people?*

"C" Archive

While material from my archive has been made available to the public through publication (internet and book form) and within installation and performances, I have always seen my work purely within the realms of artistic presentation. I have resisted open publication or access to the

core databases themselves, preferring to present the material through my own "filter" of artistic vision. My interest is not in the presentation of "reference material" for further archival research, a fact that is often misunderstood by the public, but rather as a means of reflection on the subject with a kind of "transparent view" to the archival process itself. There is of course a certain ambiguity here, in that I treat my endeavor with the language, methodology and structures of "real archives", yet my goals lie elsewhere.

"D" Archive

At the present, documentary photographic and textual materials are continually updated and made available on my website, a tedious task in itself. On the other hand, since my artistic projects are so interrelated in content and presentation forms - I have often included cross-references to other projects on-site in galleries and museums. In many of my installation and performance projects a physical archive is integrated into the setting and here are often found documentary and content holdings related to corresponding projects. I am increasingly interested in developing this aspect of my work, as a form in which the two collections might inform upon each other in interaction with a public.

- *What kind of material do you think they find most useful? What future do you think your archive will have? What role would you like your archive to play for other artists, the art market, performance research or the teaching of performance?*

Obviously, some kind of coordination and integration of "artist" archives is in order. A first level can be achieved easily within the internet, but when one deals with the physical world – i.e. file folders, shelves, magnetic tapes, etc., we enter a universe which has its history in the problematics of traditional archival practice. Artistic institutions, much less individual artists, are often poorly equiped to administer the past.

An important historical period for me has always been the corresponding developments in the visual arts, performance, music, dance, film, video, etc. which took place in New York in the late 60's to late 70's. What I witnessed from that time has remained relevant for me as I have crossed various intermedia boundaries in my own work. While numerous publications have come out in the last years documenting this period, much work is still relatively unknown among the younger generation, in educational academies, especially in Europe. It would seem that a lack of available research facilities has compounded this problem. This is only one of many

examples from my experience of the need for more funding for archival work in the art world. Both on an individual and on an institutional level, future planning during tight economic times often sees a competition for funds between presentation and archival activities.

- *Do you see your performance work itself as a kind of archive? Can performance be an archive of its own history?*

One might understand a performance as presentation of a process which has been developed and stored in the past. On the other hand, a performance, an event - exists only as a fleeting ephemeral moment before disapearence. An archive is a representation of mankinds' endless battle against the disapearance of information from the past; an attempt to freeze and keep forever. The archive is utopian in character. Perhaps one could create a concept of ritual which might bridge this gap. Ritual, which involves a kind of performance of repetition, has often served as a temporal and oral means of passing on cultural knowledge.

- *Are there any archives that have been an inspiration to your work (performance-related or other specialist collections)?*

A number of archives have been inspirational for my work.

Most importantly, the Archive and Library of the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormon Church) in Salt-Lake City and the international operational network. The Church is devoted to the work of a multibillion-dollar worldwide programm to collect and copy marriage records, birth records, etc. in the attempt to create a genealogical archive of all mankind. In 1992, I began referencing my work to this ambitious project.

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, who's clip-on remote beeper notified him that the file had arrived.   I imagined the inhabitants of the reading room would begin to read their materials out loud in a chorus, and this experience formed the core of many of my later "Reading Projects".[ii]

Some institutions in which I have great interest are the "Museum of Jurassic Technology" in Los Angeles and the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany.

As a guest professor in various art academies during the last years, I often take my students for a tour at a local archive. Regardless of the scale or importance of that particular institution, inevitably all pertinent subjects related to the storage of the post are invariably touched upon and discussed; within the practical experience of archival practice. Every collection has its problems of acquisition, maintenance, administration, decay, loss and destruction, from our desktop to the National Archives.

- *Would you be willing to contribute an object from your archive as a small donation ˆ this could be a note, a drawing, a photo, a prop ˆ which we could reproduce alongside the questionnaire?*

I have included a photo. If requested, I could send some additional materials.

---

[i] Many Audio Magnetic tapes from the late 70's must be baked in a convection oven from 3- 6 hours in order to be played back. After two or three playbacks, the tapes are lost forever

[ii] "Memory Arena" (1995-96); "The Memory Project" (1998), "The Reading Room (2001).