The Medium of Absence
Interview with Arnold Dreyblatt, Pit Schulz, 1997

P.S.: You call your piece *Memory Arena* an installation, but it has also the components of a concert, a theater, an art performance, a conceptual artwork, and a media art piece, especially now with the website. (which discipline did I forget?). Finally you call it an 'hypertext installation'. So even if a hypertext has often a arbitrary in and outpoint, your project has a certain history. What is the start point and what is the goal through a line of selected or given locations of performances?

A.D.: There's a chronological history to this work, which has it's seed in a moment of Finding-- in this case a book called *Who's Who in Central & East Europe 1933* which I found in an used book store in Istanbul in 1985. Memory Arena is the latest and largest of the projects which have been based on my deconstruction of this basic text. This text work, which involved considering the book as a Canon or Bible of a sort (as in a given text in which no words can be added or subtracted), began in 1990 on the occasion of a commission in Berlin to create the Hypertext Opera (coined before the WWW existed in 1989). The initial work in creating the Hypertext Libretto for that production was assisted by Heiko Idensen. In the following years, this text work expanded for realization in different media: installations in gallery settings which began in 1993; the publication of a non-linear paper book containing linked biographical fragments culled from my originally chosen 765 biographies by Janus Press Berlin in 1985 (after 2 years in which the original database was re-created and additional hundreds of pages where generated) and finally during the last 3-4 years in the creation of *Memory Arena* in Hamburg, Munich, Copenhagen and now perhaps Amsterdam. For *Memory Arena*, the web site has been developed which was available locally within the *Memory Arena* installation. During the last years additional related text materials have been collected including: collections of conversation between archivists on the internet and 4000 pages of secret police documents relating to a single central European historical figure with multiple identities which has been exhibited along with some of the *Who's Who* texts and will perhaps represent the next project stage. So there's been a thread of interest and materials running through all these projects.

P.S.: Following the different pages I have the feeling that compared with the first *Who's Who in Central & East Europe* performance I saw in Babylon 1991, where there were also slide projectors (photos) and your orchestra you used in the *Memory Project* mainly the medium of text. Following Derrida's Grammatology it is the Medium of Absence. It seems, especially when one is following the webpages, that the aim is a specific subjective experience of the processional presence of the text within a 'kafkaesque Computer' remembering a bit to the offices in the movie Brazil. This comes also to the question of the function of time and space within the hypertextual environment. this leads also the question of the function of the *music* contrary to sound. under which 'metaphor' or concept these data streams are interconnected. (I remember a CPU master archivist etc.)

A.D.: Yes, I see the original Who's Who opera as representing simulated travels through a hypertext, guided and accompanied by images and music. The material was presented to a audience from a proscenium stage and portal, and the audience was passive except for the aspect that one could not grasp all of the material at one time, so that one had to pick for reading, listening to text or music or look at images

and light. I think that both myself and Fred have searched for a more dynamic method of involving a public and a community. Additionally, I have always been interested in the spatial aspect of hypernavigation, I was just at the Media Lab at MIT where I looked at the pioneering work of the group around the now dead Muriel Cooper at the Visual Language Workshop, where they were working with visualization of three D navigation through linked text. This work was really exciting but when she died was discontinued. In the *Memory Projects,* the metaphor of participating within an archival bureaucracy setting and in a forum of simultaneous readings enable a public both to actually move through a structured environment but also to experience the dredging up of the text from the archive and their display through vocalization.

P.S.: As regards to the social aspect: what does it mean to 'confront' people in a specific local context like Copenhagen with the memory of 'Central Europe in 1933'? Which target group (I suggest a 'bourgeois', well educated) and which source group. I remember the files of the persons where often coming from the Jewish community.

A.D.: This is an unfortunate misconception. In my original choice of 765 persons from the 10,000 found in the original book, I attempted a representational sampling of all nationalities, minority groups, professions, etc. The suggestion that all of these persons are Jewish mainly comes up in Germany where we tended, especially for Memory Arena to try and broaden the context so that Germans could feel free to reflect on their own personal history as well as the collective- what does it mean to reawaken these stories, what will become of us in the future, etc. This is especially difficult in Germany to achieve- people want a statement- that they're all Jewish, or perhaps a political orientation, to be told what's important from all of these stories, an interpretation, if you will. But that's not the idea of the project- Just as we search and make associations and create our own stories within a hypertext environment- so can we find our own paths in the Memory Arena, so that the audience finds itself in a discussion of unanswered questions. We present only the suggestion. We have found however, that these problems appear, perhaps in less emotional form outside Central Europe itself. In Copenhagen we tended to emphasize that Denmark has remained historically on the edge of Europe as well, Danes went to Munich or Berlin or Vienna to study; and of course there's the aspect of the collapse of the East Block and its bearing on European unity and integration. I think it's important in this context to mention that the original book was the first and last biographical dictionary for this entire region until a similar volume in 1989. Both volumes (in 1933 and 1989) were immediately made obsolete- both appeared before a major rupture in European History.

P.S. Which function do Names play in your installation? And how does it work together with the machine-like aesthetic of a algorithmic rather then a linear narrative structure of the performance?

A.D. The Names are on one hand only one possible cross-section of the different levels of information. Other information of this kind, in the form of lists, are for example addresses, telephone numbers, lists of organizations and parties the persons belonged to, titles of books they wrote, etc. And then again, these lists are one of three types of texts I've created from the original database which also include more narrative texts, as well as what I call fragmented texts in which the biographies are scanned for keywords. The texts are furthermore divided into over 200 thematic

categories, so that in the Arena at one table the Prime Minister may be reading a text about political figures in Bosnia and Doctor at another table may read a list of Sanitariums and Hospitals. During the periodic Musical Incisions in which the machine is interrupted in midair for a 4-5 minute break, my music ensemble *The Orchestra of Excited Strings* accompanies a projected explosion of the database on the Data Wall in which names and dates and random narrative fragments burst out of the screen. Loudspeakers in different adjoining spaces carry the voices of the readers into exhibition, administrative and the cafe areas. So all in all the scanning and sifting work which I did in creating the original database is mirrored for the public, who also wanders through the event, hearing, reading and digesting a collage of information: each individual finding their own relationship to their own history, reflected in the collective history of another time and place. The repetition of the names throughout all the spoken, written and projected texts have their own resonance of course. These are real persons, and every word refers to being who existed; the names are the identifying catalog numbers in the archive of living memory.