The Memory Work
(by Arnold Dreyblatt), Performance Research, London, 1997

As an American artist who has lived over thirteen years in West, Central and East Europe; my projects have been realized in a variety of forms, such as contemporary opera and interactive performance, installation, and publication in book and digital media. Continuing to be based on found historical source materials; I have attempted to stimulate questions of memory and the collective as well as biography and micro-history.

During an eight year process of de- and re- constructing what has become an enormous body of found texts, my work has grown to encompass the subject of archiving and storage itself, which seems to reflect on the current obsessions, particularly in Europe, a haunting presence/absence of Memory: what we choose to forget and what we choose to remember. These questions lead us to ponder the how, why, and where of storage and memorializing as reflected in both literate and pre-literate cultures.

In oral societies, what one could personally and collectively remember or historicize, that which one might call a living memory (1), could only be re-collected through the recounting and repetition of traditions. Events only have meanings for the individual (i.e. to be remembered) in so far as they inform the collective and confirm shared traditions and values. The vocal, musical, and visual imaginations fight a continual battle against the fading away of this shared information by acting as a living storage mechanism. An art without identifiable individual voices seeks to recount the information one requires for spiritual and physical survival. Hence the importance of selection: not all information can be selected for retention; one could speak of a collective forgetfulness as well as a memory. In addition, in the circular time of oral societies, history is in a sense identical to memory and dreamworld, because any chronology of historical events is remade into non-linear narrative, which serves the requirements of a collective meaning.

Memory functions to negotiate transitions from past to future and to provide a glue binding the myriad impressions upon consciousness. Yet, while a pre-literate society transmits for most part within an oral tradition, it does however identify place with memory-meanings. Especially for nomadic cultures, the mapped landscape encodes markers in memory; a kind of archive of sanctified and profane locations: i.e. a holy mountain or a place where important periodic or one-of-a-kind events took place. This memory-map is not printed, it is rather a fluid repository of place/mnemonic associations.

As we recollect, we tend to locate our imaging of moments from the past in specific memory places. When we reconstruct a Memory from isolated moments, separating foreground from background, our remembering takes on the illusion of space, perhaps mirroring our experience in a three dimensional world. As Memory no longer sustains our identities, we use terminology like dislocation, displacement and dislodging to indicate our state of alienation and hidden and buried to describe the location of meaningful and often unobtainable knowledge.

With the advent of the sacred Manuscript, the oral texts of previous eras were finally written down by priveliged religious and political elites, thereby solidifying and fixing

them. Since the rise of nationalism in the last century, those in power have made often irresponsible use of the remnants of this blur of collective images and origin texts in justifying the nation-state. At the same time there occurred an accelerating mania in the collection of artifacts and material records in spaces designed for access, protection and display. These Kabinetts, museums and archives were no longer repositories of shared values but of the objects supposedly representing them. History accepts only the authority of documents to remember and interpret the past for us. The world can be understood only through its exterior and often official vestiges and traces.

The collective refuge of a flexible and continually redefined living memory is then replaced by sanctioned official histories; behind which lie the millions of original documents in dusty archives which are catalogued and put away, waiting to be found.

In our current postmodern and technocratic society we are no longer in agreement about methods and structures in approaching our numerous splintered pasts. Memory exists for us not as a shared interpretation which sustains us but only in its material remnants which are either stored externally in a passive sense or bombard us actively with information. With the transition from oral to written societies, oral collective memory has been replaced first by libraries and archives and now by ROM and RAM. Whereas the spatial characteristics of Memory were once collectively memorized and shared but internally and individually stored, the development of the written word has externalized this process and its result. We now search in the physical and virtual places of library stacks, desktop folders, and unix addresses for a meaning and a history. We have lost the mnemonic techniques of pre-literate culture.

Just as our collective memories have become externalized by society, so has our individual memory become internalized as we become preoccupied with problems of personal identity and history. It is as if we have lost the mediators between the external and internal. The internal memory of self and mind, explored through psychological reflections by the analytical method mirrors but seems discontinuous from the external one. We search and scan both our mind-self as well as the physical and the virtual archives for buried meanings which may hold some sort of key to connect with what has been lost to us. We attempt to fabricate a personal identity in historicizing our autobiography by scanning our memories and linearizing them, much as a historian re-constructs and reinterprets events in the past. But just as the rapid piling up of material records overwhelms the archivist and historian, so do our fractured selves have difficulty in assimilating the information overload of the postmodern age.

We live only in short-term Memory, while our long-term storage capabilities seem difficult to navigate, access and process. Hence the personality which seems artificially or virtually created, in a world where as Warhol was reported to have said, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. There remains an unreconcilable tension between our individual experience and the images and texts which are supposed to tell us who we are.

In 1985 I found a copy of Who's Who in Central & East Europe; (2), in a used book store (Beyoglu Kitapcilik Ltd.) - near the Galanta Tower in Istanbul. The Finding, dissection and reconstruction of this Memory Text has focused and fine-tuned my attentions into an obsession over the past decade. In attempting to read this work in

countless meanings, renovating its sense to make it new, a seemingly endless array of projects and ideas have been spurned, including the Gallery Installation, T: Out of the Great and Small Archive; the publishing of Whos Who in Central & East Europe 1933 (3) in book form; and performances throughout Europe of the Hypertext Opera Whos Who in Central & East Europe 1933 as well as the site-specific interactive performance installation Memory Arena.

For the me this book is a found artefact and I have treated it as a canonic and authoritative text: a given or closed; text to which no commentary or interpretation may be added. As I first began to randomly turn the pages of this book, I found myself entering a complex network of personal and collective myth construction: a geo-political memory of Central and Eastern Europe put together as if a puzzle from thousands of individual fragmentary stories, revealing an image of a vanished world captured at a critical point in time, which only a few years later would all but cease to exist.

Beginning with the commission to create the Hypertext Opera of Whos Who in Central & East Europe 1933 in 1990, I have now spent years creating multiple pathways through this otherwise undecipherable text, resulting in thousands of pages in which the original text material had been filtered, reorganized and deconstructed in a cut-up archive of collective memory. In the course this process, while attempting to realize a hypertext in two dimensions for the book publication by Janus Press, I realized that no objective, comprehensive cross section would be possible, and that finally only portions of text would survive, in endless formats and variations. As a metaphor for this reorganization, I imagined a grid network in which verticality represents individual lifelines from birth to death (although in fact no one in this book dies, since at the moment of death one exits a Whos Who), while horizontality indicates the points and moments of commonalty and relationship between individuals. One might travel through one personal lifeline and then shift gears laterally in a kind of virtual meeting of the 765 chosen personalities.

I attempted to present a process of reading as a continual sifting and sorting through of this endless data bank, linking fragments of information by optical and thematic association which results in a Biography of Everybody. As Gertrude Stein has written, There will then be a history of every one who ever is or was or will be living, mostly every history will be a long one, some will have a very little one, slowly it comes out of each one.(4)

I was also greatly inspired here by the printed and pedagogical structure of the Talmud in Jewish tradition. Here one finds multiple peeled onion skin layers of often conflicting commentary and interpretation in an endless ongoing international conversation between the printed work and its living reading (which takes place out loud). It is a confrontation between a written and oral tradition. One has the sense of entering a cross-referenced information network of ever increasing complexity, in which all individual elements connect to each other in a kind of medieval hypertext.

The years of manually sifting through these mountains of data in preparing the various projects gradually resulted in an interest in presenting the living environment in which data is stored, archived and brought to life within a form which would involve the public. During a period spent researching the at the British Public Record Office in London in early 1993 for a forthcoming project, I was struck by the meeting of high-

tech with 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, whos clip-on remote beeper notified him that the file had arrived.

I began developing a concept for what later became Memory Arena in 1992 but it was not realized until February 1995 at Kampnagel Fabrik in Hamburg. This was followed by performances in October 1995 at Marstall/Bayerisches Staatstheater as part of the Spiel.Art Festival in Munich and in 1996 at the Arken Museum of Modern Art as part of Copenhagen 96 - Cultural Capital of Europe. In Memory Arena, over seven hundred readers, participate in mulitiple simultaneous readings from individual files created out of the chosen 765 biographies from Who's Who in Central & East Europe within a very precise temporal and visual environment. A Reader Acquisition Team which has been established within the city during the preparation process invites and registers individuals from professional institutions, political organizations, the arts and sciences, the media; and from subcultures and minority groups, etc.

Memory Arena becomes in reality a functioning albeit temporary institution. It can be considered as a sample of a ritual event which might be periodic, (as in once a month or year) or which may exist within an indefinite time frame. The sampled excerpt, which we know as a performance is experienced either in its originally conceived form of one 12 hour day (proposed for the Remise in Vienna but never realized) or in its current variations of three or four days, for 4 or 5 hours each day. As one enters, the event seems to have begun long ago and that it will continue when one leaves, for days or years. It acts as a sign pointing to other possibilities, thereby indicating how a participant might read it in time as well as in its utilitarian functions.

Memory Arena, in its present form, includes three spaces: an Administration Area, the Arena, and the Cafe. Upon entering the installation in the Administration Hall, crowds are first processed by almost a hundred staff members in coloured uniforms through a labyrinth-like transit station, passing through numerous passageways, waiting and administrative areas and thematically related exhibitions. The administrative staff coordinate the event among the several hundred readers, the public and the hierarchical staff of archivists and bureaucrats, making sure that each individual and that all written information is at the correct place at the right time and that an Events Protocol is followed to the minute. The previously invited readers are processed separately from the arriving audience members.

The focal point of the Administration Hall is a fully operational Great Archive from which files are checked out and transported to be read aloud in a central space, the Arena. One of my concerns has been to simulate the process of searching and sorting and finding/accessing information, whether in the form of archive documents or digital readouts. From the beginning, this work has seeked to create a forum in which the general and invited public are invited to participate in a mode of non-linear associational reading and voicing, reflecting my methods in searching my Whos Who database or in turning the pages of the original lexicon in creating my own canonic text.

In the Arena itself a amphitheater-like platform containing twelve reading stations covering three sides of the space surrounds the public who are able to choose

between experiencing the collective space of simultaneous readings from Whos Who in Central East Europe 1933 or moving in closer to observe the individual reawakening of specific texts, creating their own stories and interpretations. The texts are simultaneously projected on the Memory Arena Data Wall they are read. Computer navigations through the data base are displayed throughout the entire installation complex.

The fragments of individual memory remnants which are physically located in archival storage are brought out into the open within a vocalized collective forum. One reflects on the fragmented subject, since the hypertext collage refers to persons which no longer exist (there are however no death dates in a Whos Who: when a person dies they are no longer eligible) we are left with a sampling of biographical shards. The participants often request additional biographical or background information, or to scan for a narrative or ideological line. We realize that a few lines sent in to the publisher in Zurich in 1933 is all which remains, that the subject of the piece serves only to pose questions about identity and history, rather than to answer them. Gradually one comes to cherish a few scaps of meaning, a birth date, a book title, a pregnant phrase; only to later ponder the document which will contain what little evidence of owns existence will remain in fifty years.

There therefore results in a continual exchange of roles betwee performer/participant and visitor/public. Members of the general audience who wish to take part as readers may apply at the appropriate desk in the bureaucracy and are then integrated into the system. At any given time in the Arena, well-known local or National personalities might be found simultaneously reading next to unknown persons, all of whose professions are displayed prominently on their name cards and on the Data Wall as well as on the Protocol blackboard in the Cafe area. A relativization of public and private image therefore takes place. At all times one finds oneself observing the movement and behavior of others passing through the institution, at the same time being aware that one is likewise a player for the others just by being there.

While interactivity in performance or installation is usually realized within a simplistic cause-and-effect situation, the Memory Arena enables one to connect and understand through complimentary levels of participation. One may utilize the holdings of the Archive or the Computer Navigation Center for further research in paper or digital form; one may wander the exhibition display areas or take part in a social situation within a mix of performers and public in the context of a cafe area. Sound installations and data displays transfer the ongoing ritual in the Arena to other areas.

It is through a kind of wandering amd passing through that one is given an opportunity to establish ones own meanings in an active sense. We find ourselves posing a single question, How will the past be remembered as it passes from living memory into History?. (5)

1 *History as an Art of Memory*, Patrick H. Hutton, University Press of New England, Vermont, 1993
2 *Whos Who in Central & East Europe*, Central European Times Publishing Co., Ltd., Zurich; R.P.D. Stephen Taylor, Editor, 1935
3 *Whos Who in Central & East Europe 1933*, Eine Reise in den Text, Arnold Dreyblatt, Janus Press, Berlin, 1995

4 *The Making of Americans*, Gertrude Stein, 1925; reprinted by Something Else Press, New York, 1966
5 *History as an Art of Memory*, Patrick H. Hutton, University Press of New England, Vermont, 1993