Without the presence of the past, we are without consciousness.

Interview between Claudia Banz and Arnold Dreyblatt, in: *From the Archives* , Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg, 2003

- How did you get started as an artist, where did you study?

As an undergraduate I began my studies in literature with Irving J. Weiss, who introduced me to the ideas of McLuhan and Cage. I then continued studies at what was probably one of the world's first institutes of new media the Center for Media Study in Buffalo, New York, where I concentrated on video art with Woody and Steina Vasulka, the founders of the Kitchen in New York. It was a very productive environment in Buffalo, with an interdisciplinary discourse in electronic arts, which included video, experimental film and sound. There was also an art space, Hallwalls, founded by Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman. The music department at the university was directed by Morton Feldman, and the Creative Associates, a program of the music department, was famous for inviting visiting composers and performers from around the world.

- So at first you concentrated more on video and film?

The works that I produced in Buffalo in the mid 1970s were mostly electronically produced stroboscopic images. I came upon an interest in flicker video somewhat naturally, and I was only later introduced to the early work in stroboscopic film developed by Tony Conrad and Peter Kubelka. Through my work with periodic perceptual experiments, I gradually became more interested in the physical nature of sound, in acoustics, first as a kind of parallel to my work with electronic images. Through the influence of Woody Vasulka, I understood that we were working with the language of electrons, waves and so forth, whether in sound or in video, and I gradually became more interested in sound, and thereby in music. At the same time I took part in two summer seminars with John Cage, Morton Feldman, Pauline Oliveros and Joel Chadabe and then moved back to New York City and began some years of study and as an assistant to La Monte Young. I later studied at Wesleyan University with Alvin Lucier. My work as an independent composer began in the late 1970s, and around '79 I founded my first music ensemble The Orchestra of Excited Strings. It was an acoustic string ensemble for which I developed a system of tuning, a set of new instruments and various performance techniques. Music composition has remained a parallel activity to my other interests to this day.

- You came to Europe in the early 1980s and have lived in Berlin for almost 20 years now. Did the transition from the New to the Old World affect your work in terms of content?

Through the 1980's I spent almost a third of each year traveling in Eastern Europe, often based in Budapest. I was fascinated by an almost geological sense of historical layering, migrations, population exchanges and shifting borders. There's the cliche of the superficial American with too shallow a historical consciousness, as opposed to the European sense of the burden or the weight of history. Too much history as opposed to too little. The contrast was interesting to me, because as an American, I don't have the same obligations, loyalties or respect. It can be that in the early years of developing my projects dealing with Memory, I arrived with a permit to cut up history in a Burroughsian sense, chop it into pieces and put it back together, to look at it under the microscope, if you will. I arrived with the irreverence of an American, which allowed certain methodologies which are unavailable to a European.

- In your Memory-Projects of the 1990s, you explore the subject 'memory' and European history. European history being mainly in the form of biographical documents you collected from archives, among other places. Does history, from your point of view, mediate itself primarily through biographies?

Obviously I'm interested in the ways in which the biographical details meet, the collected events of history, the lost details, the private and collective memory. There's been a discussion among historians, especially in France, such as Fernand Braudel, or Carlo Ginsburg in Italy, who have been looking at what one might call the marginal histories, the personalities and the facts which are left out of the official histories. Actually it's the fragmentation which interests me, the incompleteness, the between the lines and the unanswered questions which mark the individual destinies. I never present their destinies, I leave that open. In a biographical dictionary, the persons are still living; when you die you exit the book. I've made a choice not to work with fiction but rather with historical material, original source material as it is found in the archives. This material often tells us more about absence, about what is missing and lost than about what is actually present.

- In 1985 you came across a book in a used bookshop in Istanbul which has since become

your artistic obsession, the *Who's Who in Central & East Europe 193* . What does this book, which all your Memory-Projects center around, mean to you?

From the beginning I considered the book as a kind of canonical work, a bible, to which one cannot add or subtract. The book contains 10,000 biographies which were clearly written by the subjects themselves, even if they were written in the third person. Most of these persons have long since been forgotten, though upon entering the 'stage' of the text, they achieved prominence, however briefly. There is no index, the organization is only alphabetical; it is basically a 'flat' structure. As I stood there in the bookstore in Istanbul and turned the pages, happening upon chance associations between the 'players,' I had a fantasy that I could physically jump into the book and experience the network of biographical and historical links as a three-dimensional space. And it was in that moment, as I imagined that space, that my life-long project began. Over time this book began to tell me that this project would encompass more than just Eastern Europe and this historical break, more than only the nature of biography. It would grow to examine questions of written storage, how we store information and pass it on, as a culture and as an individual. I couldn't decide for many years whether I would have to abandon this book to move on. At some point I realized that this would only be one part, one section or Konvolut of my archive.

- *T* is another important collection of documents that you have been working on and revising for years. Who is the person behind *T*?

In 1987 I first learned about *T*, a marginal historical figure with multiple identities, active internationally and followed continuously by the intelligence services of various world powers. I began collecting archive material in 1992 for an exhibition in Berlin. Whereas the *Who's Who* material represents a Database of the Collective, as if these 10, 000 persons stand in for an infinite humanity, the *T* database reveals the fragmentary record remains of one personality, the official observations and traces of one biography, and a very unlikely one at that. So this database of the individual came to complement the corresponding Database of the Collective symbolized by the *Who's Who*. Those archives usually become digital databases at some point in time it will be in digital form that I will perform my 'operations' on the text.

- Are there yet other documents that you are collecting for your private archive?

In the early 1990s I began collecting the data later used in *Responsa* (1996) and finally in *Artificial Memory* (1999). I felt a need to 'frame' the historical material with a kind of commentary, a discussion about larger themes. I began collecting wonderful texts, albeit surreptitiously, from conversations between professional archivists in the Internet, unbeknownst to them, on the subject of external data storage, both historical and as contemporary issues. This led to another complementary theme, that of internal storage, through the metaphors of Freud in his text about the Wunderblock, and experimental and applied psychology in general. More recently I have been researching onsite on various projects to collect information from local archives, and I have become interested in the official language and political structure which holds, protects and restricts access to information.

- In some of your works you also use found photographs and other visual material but, as a rule, you confront the spectator with huge amounts of text. What is the relationship between text and image?

In the 1980s I became interested in the subject of anonymous still photography and home movies, having been influenced by a genre in the Hungarian avant-garde first initiated by Gabor Body and later further developed by two artist and archivists: Peter Forgacs and Sandor Kardos. But gradually and instinctively I gravitated to working exclusively with text. In 1992, for a solo exhibition at Galerie *o zwei* in Berlin, I defined this approach thusly: text as image. I'm interested in the moment where the text jumps perceptually back and forth from meaning to pattern, map, landscape and space and in the visual metaphor which this movement implies. Very early on 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 one's 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. This mechanism is functional and perceptual as well as metaphorical.

- The found documents or texts are staged as hypertext: on a scroll, in the digital interface, as a three-dimensional installation in space. At this point the computer comes into play. What

role does this medium play in, and for, your works?

The *Who's Who in Central & East Europe* represents an enormous amount of material. I first began selecting and copying information manually onto index cards, a process which was absurdly slow and tedious. Fortunately, the inception of the project coincided with the development of widely circulated home computers. At that time, the possibilities of working with digital imagery was rather primitive, yet it was clear to me from the beginning that digital technology from its early days was ideally well suited for the compilation of personal data. This has been one of computer technology's earliest applications, aside from missile projection prediction.
In 1990, I met Heiko Idensen who introduced me to hypertext software at a time when hypertext was still mostly a literary and utopian concept. I was also very interested in the work of Muriel Cooper at MIT, in three dimensional modeling of information in space. Unfortunately, she died prematurely and many of her ideas have since filtered into commercial areas. Central to conceptualizing with computer software is a new sense of structure, experimentation with associative ways of linking information. There is a degree of immateriality in that there is no final text the text is in a permanent state of re-creation. Since creating a database from the *Who's Who* material, I've continually recombined fragments in new ways to fit my artistic needs.
Since the early 90's, I've been concerned with the presentation of a digital automatic writing, where software accesses material according to random principles direct from a database and writes the output, letter by letter. A visitor to one of my installations once observed, history writes itself. The automation of storage has already occurred, we can search our stored traces in the Internet to find a short moment of published fame, (as Warhol predicted), but it may have been erased the next time we look. If we want a stable storage medium, we have to go back to cutting marks in stone, perhaps scratching a digital code rather than a pictorial alphabet. It may last many millennia and be found by invaders from other planets, but the capacity is limited.

- Strictly speaking, hypertext is not really an invention of the computer age. Biblical, canonical texts were treated in a similar way. Do you also refer to this tradition?

I am certainly interested in the development of the technologies of writing, and how those materials and methods have provoked particular relationships to the text. One can look at the exegesis of holy texts through inter-textual commentary, in various religious traditions. I have

written elsewhere on the influence, hidden or overt, which the content, hypertextual structure and visual layout of the Talmud has had on my work. Ive found it interesting to look at how the written and oral traditions weave in and out of the Talmud, allowing for a text to remain uncompleted, as Edmond Jabes explores so wonderfully in his work.

- In your *Reading Events* you have certain documents read aloud. The act of narrating is considered a twofold performance of the ars memoriae as the reproduction and repetition of facts and as narrative fixation of all actions and events by means of which a culture constitutes and identifies itself. So, in your work, what role does language play as a medium of memory?

These *Reading Projects* are structured as a fully functioning yet temporary institution where dusty paper file folders on archive shelves are paralleled with digital storage and display. Yet the bureaucratic aspect is tempered by a ritualistic situation, a moment of confrontation between a living person and a dead text from the past. We animate and vocalize acoustically the information which would normally be locked away in the archive. It has to be dug out, as in an archeological process; one has to locate it, bring it out of the darkness into the light, get past all the guards and functionaries, to come to a stage of consciousness, through reading out loud, communally. It has been important to find a form where the archival text is given a voice. This voice can no longer be the voice of an oral tradition which no longer exists. But the vocalization of a text exists in another mode from reading silently. We know that in the transitional phase of early print culture one did not read a text silently, that this was an ability which had to be learned. Our association with communal vocalization is with that of ritual, and perhaps the reading of historical texts out loud, in a communal situation as with hundreds of persons, as in my projects should function as a possible contemporary ritual, one which might connect us with a means of reflecting on our relation with the past.

- An art critic once called your work, especially the *Reading Events*, a gesture of resistance against the bureaucratization of modern society. Was this really your intention?

There is often a misunderstanding as to the bureaucratic nature of these projects, about the administration of information. We have this problem in a private sense, we have our desk and our office, and we end up with too many papers, so we have to file things away. Soon we need a

system, so that we can locate a particular record a second time. So we find that a certain level of organization is necessary, yet it seems never enough. In the *Reading Projects* there are hundreds of invited readers, and they must meet their files from the archive at a pre-specified time and at a specific location for a public reading. In order to insure that the file can be found, the invited persons must find their way at the appointed time to the correct position, so that an extensive administration is necessary for the functioning of the system. But of course the bureaucracy is not only practical, it is metaphorical and it is instructional. I often find that much contemporary art which concerns itself with this theme lacks this bureaucratic or systematic aspect, often because the mass of material is lacking. My experience with my projects is that one is somewhat shocked upon entering this bureaucratic atmosphere, but that this is balanced by participation in the reading itself, the output of the system. One suddenly understands that the system was necessary to make something mysterious and intimate occur.

- An archive means the removal of memory from man and, at the same time, the institutionalization of memory and remembrance. According to Derrida an archive is always also a political category' since the accessibility of certain archives depends upon existing power structures. To what extent is the political aspect part of your works?

We have to look at the decisions which are made within the different stages of this process. Many of these decisions have political implications and consequences as to what is kept and what is thrown away, what passes through this administrative filter. Some of these decisions are made by chance, by acts of god, such as when a tornado destroys a library or an archive. And there are also passive forms of decay, when insects or micro-organisms eat away at paper or the fragmentation of digital data. But there are acts of war, of wanton destruction. There are decisions made as to acquisition, what enters the collection, whether acquisition is passive or active, and so on. Decisions may be based on changes of regime, on political directives. Decisions may be made for lack of space, for economics. No archive has unlimited space; many commercial archives have periodic destruction programs for this reason. But of course, money is usually allocated according to political priorities. In addition, access itself is an extremely important issue. There are also cultural differences: The European continent represents what I would call the Kafkaesque model the institution not only protects but also prevents access through an impenetrable bureaucracy. On the contrary, in the Anglo-Saxon archive, we have the service society model, where the citizen has certain rights and the staff is there to offer

assistance.

- Are you concerned with a certain model of memory work or do you want to sharpen the awareness that historiography depends upon documents being accessible?

I think that my work functions on many levels. It might awaken particular emotions in relation to a lost or deconstructed past and yet at the same time point out the mechanisms with which we record, manipulate and recover, as an individual and as a culture. The awareness of these mechanisms might appear as negative or positive, depending on where one stands. We already live in a world of accelerating data generation which is increasingly being stored automatically, digitally, and through the Internet, for example. There are differing views about this. It is clear that there are dangers. The mania to get it all down, to hold and freeze it all, and to keep it somewhere, has its lessons and paradoxes. Patrick Hutton writes When memory ends, history begins. In many cases, as a living memory has gradually faded, the written record is all that we have, fragments and all. I am not trying to privilege the written over the oral or vice versa, I am attempting to create an environment in which one can find a personal response. In your more recent works you have gone back to subjects, such as the stroboscopic image, that you have already explored in the past.

For many years I have concentrated mostly on external storage mechanisms and institutions, so that my work on the installation, *The Wunderblock* (2000) was a turning point for me, in that text fragments referring to external storage are contrasted with phrases from Freud's own metaphorical model which meditates on the psychological, internal layers of short and long term memory in the brain.

I suppose I then closed a full circle by returning to my early interest in stroboscopic perception, now utilizing textual content. I looked through the scientific literature on the subject of so-called *Flashbulb Memory* and selected phrases which in the installation are readable only as an afterimage, that is, in the brain. So it's an interesting model: a bridge from external to internal perception. In *Flashbulb Memory* (2001), I examined this so-called now print! mechanism which occurs at a moment of collective importance - where personal history meet the collective and the environment is frozen and stored. In my most recent work, *Recovery Rotation* (2003), I've extended this concept to an automated 360 degree flash text machine. At the moment of the flash the text is unreadable, so that the few text fragments one perceives are in fact no longer there in external reality, but the fading traces are still visible for a short time within an internal,

psychological space. We attempt to retain a fragment of information in the perceptual residue of the flash. As in much of my work, there is a functional and a metaphorical layer, and the interaction between the two. The content texts actually describe what takes place in interaction with my machine.

- Interactivity is an important aspect of your work. To what extent is the viewer or visitor part of the concept? Is his/her presence crucial to the completion of the work?

I've always found the word interactivity to be misused, especially in installations utilizing digital media. Often what passes for an interactive installation is merely a disguised on/off switch, whether built up from complex software or mechanical means. If one understands reading, either silently or out loud, as a form of interactivity, yes, one could say that the visitor completes the work. Yet an answer to this question is rather complex. In many of the installation works, a form of automatic writing needs no presence of a viewer. It's the old adage: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is present … Yet, it is the awareness on the part of the viewer that the work has been actively writing before and after his or her physical presence which is most important to the experience of the work. It is the sense of an almost bottomless and limitless source of textual fragments which must be perceived to really experience the grain of sand/beach dialectic I've already alluded to. Likewise, in the reading performance situations, the interactivity takes place in the participation, in the act of reading a text which one has never seen before. This interactivity on the part of the reader takes place whether there are audience members present at that point in time or not. It's often a beautiful moment in those projects to experience all of these so-called invited guests reading to nearly nobody. Of course there is a secondary form of interaction which takes place for the wandering audience who is present at the moment of first confrontation with the text by the reader.

- In recent times you have also shown a renewed interest in music and worked again as a composer. Is your music and visual art intertwined or do both areas represent their own entity?

I am often asked this question. My continual identity as a music composer goes back twenty-five years. As I began to work again in a visual context, especially in theater in the early nineteen nineties, my music quite naturally accompanied these developments. The *Who's Who* Opera

was a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, in which all of my interests were brought to fruition under one roof. The minimal structures and timbre of my music is quite suitable for accompanying the recitation of text. In the early reading projects, such as the *Memory Arena*, music compositions performed by my ensemble, *The Orchestra of Excited Strings* functioned as unexpected incisions into the hours of communal recitation. But in the mid-nineties I felt that in order to further develop the installation aspects of the larger work, a separation of these interests would be needed. On the other hand, I consider the complex scores for the reading projects, in which readings are specified for each table according to time, reader name and profession, and archive file content, as a musical score for an acoustic situation. Tony Conrad, the filmmaker and composer, who I consider as one of my mentors, once pointed out that my music, in its examination of acoustic texture and tuning, might have found ist counterpart as a form of pattern recognition in textual analysis.

- Your work touches on many different aspects of the subject memory and remembrance. Now you are turning towards the memory of specific locations and landscapes. Is there an encyclopedic aspiration behind this project, i.e., do you find yourself in the position of a researcher trying to explore his subject in all possible directions?

Ive been attempting to allow the work to expand into some new areas which were perhaps implied by my original conception but were not explored fully until now. The implications of the project at its inception years ago have only gradually become clear to me with time. Perhaps that's why I've always understood this endeavor as more than a chronological line of consecutive works. The usual art-world definition of work, media and biography seem insufficient and banal here. The individual works are part of a larger plan, a project. As soon as I manage to map an area of this project, new aspects inevitably unfold. The project is of course greater than me; I can only skim the surface during the time I have left. After all, without the presence of the past, we are without consciousness. What could be a greater theme?