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Beyond Storage and Retrieval
Some remarks on 'Media Memory'
by Geert Lovink

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The supposedly neutral and scientific 'meme' discours poses the question how 'information' travels through time. There is the preassumption of an imaginative future, which will no longer be able to cope with the output of all the data, produced in our present (cq. our ancestors past). In this vitalist information theory, 'memes' are urged to compete with each other in a dramatized struggle over life and death, in favour of the attention of the coming race of superior info-navigators, the 'post humans'. Apparently, the Future can not decide itself, what to remember and what to forget. It is the task of the current computer experts, to decide over the 'past of the future' and let neo-Darwinist programs do the selection, before others will do. But who will set the rules and parameters for the competition called 'The Survival of the Fittest Information'? The media culture at the fin de millennium is obsessed with the Storage Question. Which information will we, planet Earth, take with us into the next century? This storage panic is even overshadowed by the even greater fear for 'information overload'. Today's fight over the hearts of the people (and tomorrow's history) can only be won with a deep knowledge of the 'attention span' of the user-masses, out there. Mediocre homepages, outmoded advertisement, boring databases and third class imagery are considered 'dead information'. What makes slumbering 'content' interesting and 'alive' seems to be the amount of 'visitors', their communication inside a particular context and their actual interaction with a specific cloud of data. All other stored materials, on-line or not, with or without fancy design or the latest software, are presumed non-existing, and will be in the future. That's the hardcore logic of this digital age: attract users, or get toasted.

The first generation of specialists still considers the computer as a logical, mathematical 'number crunching machine'. The computation tool is seen as a product from both World War Two and the Cold War and its military pre-history is still present in all current machines. Storage and retrieval in this context are merely commands, not social processes with possible historical implications. The architecture of the hardware is determining the software. Autonomous processes and the appearance of large numbers of users inside computer networks therefore do not exist as such for these pioneer-programmers. Dr.

Frankenstein and the T-1000 remain what they are, namely popular myths, produced by the mass-entertainment business. The same can be said about New Age cyberculture and all Internet hype. Hardcore computer knowledge is still shared by a small amount of programmers (and hackers) and so is their philosophy (Turing) and archeology of the computer, which goes back to late mediaval times (Lullus). In the past decades, these owners of the engineer knowledge, have (or have not) learned to deal with the inherent 'instrumental rationality' of the computer and all related automation processes. The mainly academic community focused, at best, on topics like privacy, social responsibility in labour/capital relations, links with military-industrial-complex, etc. But not with the computer as a medium. The self-evident, almost unconcious relation we nowadays make between the computer, its unavoidable merger with television and 'the media' seems alien to the enigneers, hackers and programmers of the first hour.

Virtual Reality still is in the first place a technology used for scientific visualization, not for entertainment. The gap between computer research and development and the 'networks for the masses' is as big as allways, despite the 'digital revolution'. 'Media Memory' as a part of the Ars Electronica 96 Festival, poses the question how we will make the connection between 'collective memory' and the new media. In the year '50 plus 1' after the victory over fascism in 1945, the Holocaust still is the prime test case how media and memory should relate to each other (also, historically of course, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the inventention of the computer are deeply interwoven). James Young, in his book on the history and meaning of Holocaust memorials, 'The Texture of Memory', prefers to call it 'collected memory'. "The society's memory might be regarded as an aggregate collection of it's members' many, often competing memories. If societies remember, it is only insofar as their institutions and rituals organize, shape, even inspire their constituents' mememories. For a society's memory cannot exist outside of those people who do the remembering - even if such memory happens to be at the society's bidding, in its name." Media memory, in this context, could be the way in which society actively uses the stored information about the past. With Young we could speak of an "art of public memory" in which large, inactive archives will play an important role in the future, as extensions of the existing sites of memory.

Media memory is embedded in the way people are using machines, it is an active process of constructing the past, not a mere technical one, which can be reduced to 'storage' and 'retrieval'. For Young the sites of memory range from "archive to museums, parades to moments of silence, memorial gardens to resistance monuments, ruins to commemorative fast days, national malls to a family's Jahrzeit candle." And how will the memory of Holocaust within cyberspace look like, how will it relate to the existing museums, archives, films and tv-programs, libraries, education in schools and the hugh variety of artworks, as descibed in James Youngs book? This organization of 'collected memory' goes beyond the now often discussed ways the brain functions and the

myths about 'uploading', as Hans Moravec describes it. Media memory asks about the role of the machines in the social process of remembering and the contribution of technology in the everyday life dialogue with the past, how to combine the passive 'storage' with active ways of 'memory'. This goes even beyond the quest for a virtual architecture and the design of large on-line systems which will give us access to historical information. Specially in the relation to fascism, media memory, being self-reflexive, should also deal with 'instrumental rationality' and the role of the ordinary, task-oriented engineers of cyberspace.