Wilfried Agricola de Cologne: an interview

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Wilfried Agricola de Cologne
A dynamic Network from Cologne
2010
Interview: Gioula Papadopoulou*

*(*Gioula Papadopoulou is a curator and basic member of Festival Miden)*

Wilfried Agricola de Cologne *is a visual artist involved with new media and video and founder and director of some of the most known and influential international platforms for new media, such as the online mobile film festival* **Cologne OFF**, *the web platform* **VideoChannel** *(an online collection of thematical/national curatorial contributions from well-known festivals and curators around the globe) and many other networking projects. All under the general title* **The Network**, *which reveals the essence of the basic philosophy of his activities: the creation of a global co-operational network between festivals, groups, artists and organisations that deal with video and new media. Starting his activities in 2000 "from point zero", as he says (after a long-lasting coma which interrupted his creative course and his life), he managed in a decade to become a significant reference point internationally, with numerous partnerships and co-operational projects all over the world. A "traditional" artist before the coma, he is reborn after that and starts from the beginning as a "virtual" artist, changing his life and re-directing his art towards the creation of a digital online community, a social-artistic network before Web 2.0 and social networks even existed.*

His co-operation with **Festival Miden** *started last year, with exchanges of screenings in the context of the mobile festival Cologne OFF. In this context, Festival Miden presented in 2009 a selection from Cologne OFF and a program from VideoChannel, while Festival Miden screenings travelled along with Cologne OFF to Slovenia and India and a selection of Greek video-art from Festival Miden is permanently presented among the online collections of VideoChannel.*

In this year's edition of Festival Miden, Wilfried Agricola curates 2 programs, presented on the premiere day of the festival (Thursday 8/7, Screen B): **Found Footage!** *(a thematical screening with videos using found and archive footage) and the interactive program* **Flash & Thunder** *(a selection of artistic works created with Flash).*

In the following interview, Wilfried Agricola de Cologne talks about his artistic concerns, his work and his plans for the future.

-What is it that initially attracted you in video-art and new media? And what are the things you discovered afterwards?

The answer is quite complex, but there is neither the time nor the space to go deeper into the subject matter. Due to the highly dramatic course of my life, I was forced to stop my artistic activities at the end of 1998 completely, working mainly with the "old" classical media. After one year break, I started on 1.1. 2000 a completely new life from point zero, related to art working with new media and the Internet as the basic medium for artistic activities. Starting from the cell of a small Internet based art project, entitled " A Virtual Memorial", since then I developed in evolutionary artistic processes a most complex globally working network of project environments, artists, curators, organisations and institutions, forming from the beginning a social network in times, when Web 2.0 and social networks like Facebook etc were not even planned. Creating this global networking project took most of the time since 2000 and represents the essence of my artistic working. The new idea behind, was not only developing such a universe of art of its own, but playing also most different roles as one single person, the programmer, multimedia-developer, curator, festival director, videoartist and much more, and I created new art forms, for instance, curating as my specific form of media art.

I did not come to videoart before 2002, and then also only by focusing on the digital aspects of video art. I never liked the classical forms of analogue video on VHS and I still do not like that, and I had never an affinity to classical filming, although I love cinema and classical films very much, but they never had any influence on my doing, thus it was also never my ambition to work once on a feature film, like many other video- and filmmakers do.

When I was developing my art projects for the Internet, I felt the need for including also video components. Streaming video did not exist, yet, in the of time of low bandwidth Internet, and the reduction of file size needed to be made by preparing the heavy video files in a very specific time-eating way using also a special type of programming.

In these times, 2002-2003, I created the first art works for the net integrating video, and I recognised for the first time also my strong affinity to the moving pictures. I like to use my digital video camera, I like to edit the video material and create something new out of it, by taking influence on all processes myself.
What I did not like, was the dependence on companies providing technical equipment and editing in regard of VHS video, while using digital video, I have all freedom to act as the producer, director, composer etc, thus creating a total art work in the hand of one single person, me.

In 2003, I created my 1st one minute film and an individual art work outside of the Internet and extended the duration of my videos nearly until the magic mark of 15 minutes. The way how I create videos in an artistic process, however, is quite different to a way of working based on scripts, and at a duration of 15 minutes I loose the overview over my creative intensions.
But concerning the duration, I got the perception, that it does actually not really matter, since it is possible to put in a very short film or video on different layers as many time as it is needed for satisfying the artistic intensions. This is really time based art.

-You have created several platforms for video-art and new media on the web. All connected and all based in Cologne, but with several international collaborations. Can you make a brief description of these activities?

Working with the Internet was and is enforcing actually my creativity enormously to expand ideas, projects and concepts, new type of interactive elements come up, like participatory aspects, intercontinental cooperations via networking. From the beginning my projects were presented successfully on festivals and media art exhibitions. It was the interactivity of the Internet, which let me start first with participatory projects, i.e. projects I invited artists from different parts of the world for participating in, from such projects consequently developed the idea of curating, curating contents, artists, curators, organisations etc. But in 2004 I started consequently working on Internet based platforms dedicated to specific digital media. The first one was VideoChannel and some other project platforms like SoundLAB, as a part of a gigantic media art project; which was presented 2004 on the Biennale of Electronic Art in Perth/Australia. The concept of VideoChannel is to invite curators from all parts on the globe to prepare a contribution of videoart from their homecountries. VideoChannel started in Perth with an Installation of 100 videos around the topic "memory" and "identity", and since 2005 VideoChannel was acting as an independent platform following the original concept. In 2006, I founded CologneOFF - Cologne Online Film Festival in the framework of VideoChannel, which became unexpectedly successful as a curatorial festival platform without a static festival location.

Behind all activities stands the idea of an international networking, but the general difference is that I need for my projects, platforms and activities always collaborating partners, so the intensions go always in direction of creating international networking structures including artists and other art related people and organisations .

-How did this idea start and what did you hope to create via this network?

When I was speaking of my dramatic course of life, I need to add, that I started my artistic activities with new media and the Internet, after recovering from a longer lasting coma from the position of a completely isolated person, who created his own universe of art and communication via the Internet from point zero. When people face the complex construction of networking and communicating partners nowadays, they hardly can imagine, that in the beginning not any contact existed, just a vague idea, and only by doing and creating and experimenting, by looking actively for people, artists and networking partners in the end the success became obvious. Nobody also can imagine, how different this pioneering time of Internet and Internet based art was, there was a special type of spirit which got lost however during the following years, and differently to these times, it is often no pleasure any more to follow that these days under the changed conditions.

Since it was not really my intension to create a network, but the network developed by doing, it is difficult to say what I actually hoped to create. I felt the need to do it and I did it. In this way, I had also no wrong expectations and was never disappointed.

-During all these years you have collaborated with numerous artists, curators and festivals from all over the world. Would you like to tell us some things about all this experience?

When I started in 2000, I had no idea where my activities would be leading to. But soon, by analysing the Internet for its use as a medium for contemporary art, special features became

visible from being interactive, I invited artists to participate in new projects to be created, selecting and curating artists and art works, involving other curators and curating curators, by looking for partners worldwide mainly from festival structures which have a specific form of organising things basically not on long but short term.

In this way, a specific type of activities of mine developed and I was creating a community on a voluntarian basis just by doing. It became a real community since the people did not leave, but stayed and became permanent visitors and friends. It is that type of community I feel at home, since all people involved speak the same language, I do not mean expressively English, whereby the common language is certainly very supportive, no, I mean the same or similar cultural understanding, this new medium of the Internet was really enforcing. I love to be connected with other artists and creatives, to face new talents and include such talented people in my activities. It is a special type of people, who mostly are not focused on just themselves, but rather devoted to a common idea. I love the exchange on different levels not only via the Internet, but of course also in physical space.

But doing the same in physical space, is really something else, since all conditions are completely different and it is actually not really possible to transport the good experiences from the Internet to physical space, since in the physical world old dogmatic rules take influence on everything.

-What are the negative and positive aspects of being involved in so many activities? And in parallel creating your personal work as an artist?

From my point of view, actually there are no negative aspects. Since my life is focused exclusively on art, me as a private person actually does not exist. This can be problem, however, since I am actually not recognised as a physical but virtual person who is doing his job progressively. But people and also I forget sometimes , that behind all is standing one single very sensitive and vulnerable person, who started all after dramatic violent experiences, which have again a dramatic influence on my life since 2008 after a series of violent attacks which were killing me nearly several times. Nobody has such a course of life in one's mind and is also not prepared for that and even less facing the consequences and effects resulting from this violence.

Being involved in so many activities, thus showing that type of hyperactivity has actually the meaning to me to compensate of all the time I lost through violence during the past decade, I did not loose one day, weeks or months, but years. Time nobody can give back to me.

These activities were never, however, anything else than a specific expression of my media art working, so there was never a separation or conflict between my individual art working in form of these videoworks and what I call my social artworking in form of working actively as a creative in the networking structures I am developing. My curating, for instance, can really not compare with the curating of the museum curator, since the conditions and goals of curating are fundamentally different. But the perceivable result may be the same.

One can honestly not speak of parallel activities, therefore, when I was creating my own video works, since also these activities are and were standing in the context of creating the network. It is rather like that, that the individual and the social art working were depending on each other, since the participation in festivals with my individual art formed the basis of using these contacts for developing my networking projects like VideoChannnel or CologneOFF, and on the other hand, all the travels which I was undertaking when I was invited to make presentations, I used for filming and collecting the video material for creating new individual video works.

So there is a continuously exchange and network between these differently seeming art expressions.

-What type of new media do you find more interesting?

I think my preference for certain media changed during the years.
I actually find interactive art most interesting, since it really represents a new step in giving art another meaning, respectively to define art in a new way.
As I see it from my experiences, creating interactive art works, however, represents a very complicated and most time intensive matter, and being honest, I am meanwhile tired to fight with technology.
I actually want to work directly on my artistic ideas, receiving immediate results, and working with video as my preferred medium gives me the satisfaction I need currently. So my perception of art moved towards the moving images, this can be videoart, but also certain forms of art using film, whereby I do not mean directing a feature film.

-What are you planning for the future?

I would like to succeed in returning to physical space as a physical artist.
This eventually may sound strange, but in 2000 and the following years I was surviving only as virtual artist, and as a private physical person I did not exist. The basic difference is that as a virtual artist the values, especially the material values are different and compared with the virtual space of the internet, physical space, respective structures of the physical art scene is always following conservative rules.
But the process is still running.
I would like to give something in return to all those fantastic collaborating partners during the past years, and would like to organise a big videoart festival in Cologne*, but not as an event to take place regularly. Even if I have the best conditions for realising that, my current life has, yet, some instabile components, which have really bad influence and it is not possible to focus entirely on the realisation of this festival, but I am working on overcoming the bad spirit which is blocking me.
After thanking my friends via organising that festival, I actually would like to concentrate on my individual art working using video and the combination of different (new) media. I have so much material collected during the past years, that it becomes time for me to give this artistic potential the chance it deserves. But doing also some curatorial and organising work, since I like organising.

*(*Note: The festival he refers to is already being organised since the beginning of 2010. It will be held in Cologne in the context of the 10 years celebrations of The Network, in autumn 2010)*

Platforms and projects founded/directed by Wilfried Agricola de Cologne:

The NETWORK ~
[NewMediaArtProjectNetwork]:||cologne – experimental platform for art & new media
http://www.nmartproject.net/

NetEX - networked experience (2005-)
http://netex.nmartproject.net/
netMAXX – networked magazine (2007 -)
http://maxx.nmartproject.net
AND – Artists Network Database (2006 -)
http://and.nmartproject.net
Media/Art/Cologne (2008 -)
http://and.nmartproject.net
VAC – Video Art Consortium (2009 -)
http://vac.mediaartcologne.org
VideoChannel Cologne – videoart-artvideo (2004 -)
http://videochannel.newmediafest.org/
VIP – VideoChannel Interview Project (2006-)
http://vip.newmediafest.org
CologneOFF - Film Festival (2006 -)
http://coff.newmediafest.org/
VAD – Video Art Database (2008 -)
http://and.nmartproject.net
artvideoKOELN (2010)
http://group1.mediaartcologne.org
AdC – Time Based Arts - distribution of culture (2009 -)
http://and.nmartproject.net
A Virtual Memorial Foundation (2000 -)
http://www.a-virtual-memorial.org/
Memorial for the Victims of Terror (2001-)
http://terror.a-virtual-memorial.org
Memorial for the Victims of Aids (2001-)
http://aids.a-virtual-memorial.org
Tsunami Memorial (2004 -)
http://tsunami.a-virtual-memorial.org
Family Portrait (2001-2005)
http://familyportrait.engad.org/
Women: Memory of Repression in Argentina (2004-)
http://argentina.engad.org
://selfportrait - a show for Bethlehem (2006-)
http://self.engad.org
Draft Title: Shoah (2009)
http://dts.engad.org
Cinematheque – streaming media (2001 -)
http://cinema.nmartproject.net/
JavaMuseum - Forum for Internet Technology in Contemporary Art (2001-)
http://www.javamuseum.org/
JIP - JavaMuseum Interview Project (2006 -)
http://jip.javamuseum.org/
NewMediaFest – (2002 -)
http://www.newmediafest.org/
NewMediaFest'2010
http://2010newmediafest.org/
Violence Online Festival (2002-)
http://violence.newmediafest.org/
SoundLAB - sonic art project environments (2004 -)
http://soundlab.newmediafest.org/
SIP – SoundLAB – Interview Project (2006-)
http://sip.newmediafest.org
Agricola de Cologne (2000-)
http://www.agricola-de-cologne.de/
Agricola de Cologne Moving Picture Collection (2001-)
http://movingpictures.agricola-de-cologne.de/