

# Interview with Agricola de Cologne

## Introduction:

**Wilfried Agricola de Cologne joined Plastica-Argentina more than a year ago, he was one of the firsts multimedia artists on collaborate with good will with this participative art project with "old and new" technologies.**

Today, with the assistance of Irene Coremberg, who collaborated with him several times, we dedicate this space of reflection to Agricola de Cologne and are grateful for his contribution by means his words.

But to enter at the work of this artist very well known throughout the world and probably being among the most prolific ones in the net, is to penetrate in a world where the technological aspects are included as well as the conceptual ones, the complex as well as simple ... is to dive oneself without lifebelt in this sea of ideas and ideals, which converge at the entire work of Wilfried.

## The interview:

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

First of all, I would like to give you my thanks for your participation at <http://www.plastica-argentina.com.ar>, and for your tireless work at the field of digital media, work that you always share with us through your constant info mailing that we included in our site or in our blogs.

### **Wilfried:**

It is a pleasure for me to keep you updated and I am pleased that you see my work as relevant enough to post so many news releases on your site.

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### **Gabriela / Irene:**

At the date of 18 July of 2006, we uploaded at the "Espacio Teórico" (Theoretical Space) (<http://plastica-argentina.com.ar/espacioteorico/?p=63>) an interview which was made by Escáner Cultural (<http://www.escaner.cl>) where I could perceive your wide trajectory and your way in the arts. That's why I would like to talk deeply about certain questions related with your work and the new technologies applied to them.

In that interview you said that "people do not recognize "my style", because they do not want to see my specific view on the things, the philosophical ideas behind everything I am doing". Are your philosophical ideas – I think that those ideas are living across all your work giving it an Identity - related to a strong sense of compromised art and social art?

### **Wilfried:**

Art as I understand it is different than just its reduction to mere aesthetics like we know it from "l'art pour l'art", which defines art autonomously acting without any social context.

The term "social art" gives a wrong idea, as if the "social" aspect of art would represent just a kind of niche, while art in general would have no social component, actually. Art from its early beginning of human civilization was always a communicating medium and as such a "social" tool, art is and was always used for transporting "memory" from a sender (the creator) to an audience to be perceived by the senses This is good for art from stone age until these days.,

Actually, my philosophical ideas do not represent much spectacular. They are simply based on the structures of life. Everything is related to each other acting dynamically within an all encompassing whole, whereby it is the question what is defined as the such a whole, the Universe, a galaxy, the planet Earth, the human society, a human

individual, his brain, a cell, DNA, a gene etc. this can be continued until the largest or smallest thinkable whole.

The human society as a whole would consequently get a kind of ideal image, within the individuals act as social beings, who communicate, exchange and take responsibility for each other. "Memory" as a whole and the contents art is transporting is constructed in this holistic principle, consisting of subjective experiences which are set in context to each other. The human brain as the most complex networking construction is consisting of millions of synapses which all are connected to each other.

Art on the Internet in general, and now I return to my ideas, and especially how I practice it is much closer to the original meaning of art than it was ever before, it is even more radical than it was ever before. In so far it is not wrong to speak of "social" art, because it is multiplying the idea of the "social" aspect this way.

Transferred to the spectrum of my work, the all encompassing whole represents the [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork]: ||cologne, and the networking project environments represent the subordinated wholes, and each subordinated whole, like VideoChannel - <http://videochannel.newmediafest.org> , or [R][R][F]200x--->XP - <http://rnf200x.newmediafest.org> , incorporates again subordinated wholes on different levels, for instance external artists projects etc. These projects do not just represent "social" contexts within the framework of the network or the respective (subordinated) whole, but the social context is basically also related to the networking people, also subordinated wholes, i.e artists, organisations, and users who interact in different ways, of course.

So, the philosophical ideas do not just manifest themselves in the way how I deal with the main theme "memory", but also in the way the art projects are structured in a global context of its own.

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**Gabriela / Irene:**

The Globalization, which is often much criticized, seems to be your "culture medium" for creations, as an individual or as a group. ¿How has influenced your work the use of mass media?

**Wilfried:**

Globalization is actually neither good, nor bad. It is the question how people deal with the tools of globalization and then, of course, with the result of using these tools. Depending on the respective point of view it can be positive or negative.

The Internet belongs indeed meanwhile to the mass media, but it represents also a social context people can act in in most different ways. In many concerns, globalization finds here a really positive expression, as it allows a global communicating in real time and distance does not play a role any more. The physical presence of people is not needed to start and execute cross-culture, cross-society, cross-religion activities and let the perception come true: "we are one world".

I use the Internet as a platform for such borderless artistic activities, the online community can participate in. Artists from more than 70 countries collaborate with me, exchange ideas and become this way part of a global network, my specific type of art projects as they manifest themselves in numerous project environments and platforms and the all encompassing [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork]: ||cologne – [www.nmartproject.net](http://www.nmartproject.net) .

In my case, I created new art forms by including participatory, networking and curatorial aspects. These big project platforms which incorporate a confusing variety of aspects, components and artists, are in first place always artworks, one can see them as smaller or bigger virtual sculptures constructed according to a kind of collage principle.

The global aspect is not only related to globalization in the sense of spinning a net of activities around the globe, but also in this sense that each of these bigger project environments form a cosmos of its own, a kind of new universe with global aspects of its own.

This type of "globalization", i.e. giving the projects individual global attitudes, represents something new, which I learned only by dealing the Internet.

## 2-----

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

"Digital Art". Even if it has evolved for many years and has his own way, is a concept still very questioned, nevertheless it was already legitimized by many institutions by means of competitions and biennales. Why you think it happens?

### **Wilfried:**

It is a strange phenomenon, nowadays nearly everything is digitalized, without digital technologies normal life is hardly thinkable in the Western countries, and nevertheless, digital art, in general, and Internet based art, in particular, for instance, is still not really accepted as a specific form of contemporary art by those who dominate opinion in art.

Still, many art critics and curators are simply afraid of a non-exclusive type of art, what digital art represents, many are afraid of technology and try to condemn new developments in terms of civilization and conserve dogmatic ancient views on art, but they will not win, meanwhile many of them gave up to block everything.

Some go much further, as they recognized, in order to keep power they conquered this new medium, even if many have no idea of technology and technology based art. In this way, new art forms are meanwhile about to be killed and are threatened with extinct.

Often enough, the same people, who were fighting against digital art are now those who try to dominate, sometimes even defend it.

## 3-----

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

The concept of movement and the inclusion of light and bytes as "physical" support of your work have a major place in your art development. Do you believe that net-art is among the media where video-art can find a natural place?

### **Wilfried:**

Actually, streaming video represents generally one feature of Internet based activities, also in art. Streaming video is often incorporated in netart as a specific component for transporting certain linear contents.

In form of streaming video, video-art can represent itself netart and this can manifest itself in really interesting innovative ways, but a main feature of netart represents the non-linear interactivity. Video online has still the problem that not all people have a broad bandwidth Internet connection which is needed for its display.

The incorporation of video-art in netart works represents a kind of double feature which makes sense just in specific cases, for instance in VideoChannel

<http://videochannel.newmediafest.org> , which is expressively featuring video-art, as other wise video-art would loose its individual relevance. The relevance of video-art in an artistic online context is basically depending on the concept and type of the project video-art is embedded it.

Generally, can be said, however, besides for videos which are created especially for the net what I do often, the better space for video is always physical space, since the limited virtual space of a computer monitor can display a video just small sized compared with the large sized dimensions of physical screenings.

**Gabriela / Irene:**

What is the value of net-art, video-art and their symbiosis in the contemporary art world?

**Wilfried:**

This question cannot be answered so easily, since we talk about different art genres, which have a different history and status/position in the contemporary art world.

While videoart is widely well accepted around the globe and used basically in physical space, in installations, projections or screenings, thus the perception of space is most relevant, netart is not accepted such widely, if at all. Netart is Internet based, thus an art form for virtual space and in this case restricted to a specific size of display (computer monitor), and there are various reasons, why netart probably will never be such a popular art genre like videoart is now already, and would not even survive, eventually.

While digital video is blasting the limits of (conventional) cinema as it can be displayed at any place where a computer/notebook can be used, since broad bandwidth Internet connection made the display and transfer of video data online easier, videoart can be also displayed via the net, even on mobile phones, but it is actually just a reproduction or documentation of the video work, but as such not an artwork and this way also not videoart.

Video is very often part of netart, for instance in order to display time based linear contents. But generally, the large sized video files need to be converted to a smaller size and a smaller resolution causing a loss of quality, in the respective cases.

On the other hand, special technologies allow the creation of Internet specific video art, vector based animations or a combination of vector based images and a type of linear video, for instance, created in Flash (software application by MACROMEDIA/Adobe) which has potentially a reduced files size but an excellent image quality which can, differently from a video file, be zoomed / enlarged without a major loss of image quality. Flash as a medium for the integration of different media has much potential in non-linear interactive netart and also in such animated works, and represents currently one of the most popular creative environment used by artists. Linear programmed works can be even converted to digital video files and used offline, they may even represent videoart this way.

The value of videoart is currently really high and increasing, video has the potential to replace painting as the most popular artistic medium, the moving image is the expression of our time, and the use of video is not elitist or exclusive, but due to the reasonable hardware and software, it became a mass medium.

In contrary to this, even if netart has its location on the "mass medium" Internet, it is anything else than popular, and its value in the contemporary art world is just marginal. An artist who is creating non-linear interactive netart, has to have much more artistic skills and technological knowledge, and the way of programming stands actually also against the rather "chaotic" and less organized and less logic character of art. Much experience is needed to find out the individual potential of netart, this cannot be done, if artists create just one work once a year. The few artists who are dealing continuously with netart during many years give evidence, that netart is mostly just a temporary phenomenon in the work of an artist, most of them realize just one single work, much less continue for a longer period and create occasionally a work, but most of them give up after a maximum of three years. So an artist generation is not longer lasting than three years normally, and in fact each generation is starting from point zero without

using the knowledge of the previous generation. In this way, waves of repetitions of netart take place nearly every three years and there is actually no progress but the status quo.. From my personal point of view this is just disappointing. There are just a few artists worldwide who practice netart continuously or intensively for more than three years.

One basic point should be not neglected, there does not exist a (commercial) market for netart, and artists cannot earn their living from creating netart. After a certain time, there is simply no motivation left any longer, as there are also not too many other chances during a year than applying for participating in some festivals focusing on electronic/digital art.

Just the number of artists practicing netart, there are currently not more than 2000 world wide who practice netart in one or the other way, give evidence of the relevance of netart among artists and generally the art world, even if art schools in many Western countries have nowadays courses in netart. I think it is rather the idea behind netart which makes it attractive, less the reality and status in art.

Many artists use Flash as a tool for creating animations, but one can mostly not speak of netart as they are not made for or used on the net, but the software is just used for creating animated videos or videoart.

From my point of view, it is really the question whether a symbiosis of videoart and netart has the potential to change the perception of netart profoundly. This would be, however, actually the condition that such a symbiosis can get any relevance and value in the contemporary art world.

## 5-----

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

How you see the Argentina position in the world map on using the new technologies in art?

### **Wilfried:**

I think, I am not expert enough to be able to give the expected substantial answer. However, indirectly I get an idea, since I collaborate with a remarkable number of Argentine artists and I collaborate also with one or the other Argentine art institution or organization who all are active in the digital/electronic field.

Generally, can be said, that digital art has a specific relevance in all Latin American countries, especially the use of the Internet, respectively the communicating technologies and the affordable tools like computers etc give people the feeling to belong to a global culture and have a personal share in general in terms of civilization and the technological progress, even if most of these countries are quite poor.

As a part of this global culture, Argentine artists can compete with any artist from any other country, but the problem mostly is that non-Argentine people do not know much about. As I see it, this represents rather a mental problem, a problem of perception and a wrong estimation of one's talents, the lack of daring to do the step to an unknown territory, but less a lack of money, for instance.

## 7-----

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

You worked several times as a curator for many different projects... please, tell us some anecdote which had been important for your creative process.

### **Wilfried:**

I have been curating before 2000 just a few times. After 2000, when I was developing my complex Internet based art works which can be defined as social contexts, consequently participatory, networking and curatorial aspects became relevant.

So, curating represents a kind of natural consequence if someone is dealing as an artist with the Internet.

And for me, curating represents my specific way of artworking, and acting in the social contexts I am creating.

Many projects of other artists on the net give evidence about this practice, as well.

The term curating comes from the context of museums.

A curator is that person who cares for special fields/tasks like art collection, conservation, documenting, archiving or organizing an exhibition. In fact, curating means dealing with subjects, objects, contents, art, artists etc in a careful selective way.

Therefore curating is a typical way of acting in a social context of such Internet based projects.

My way of curating is going far beyond the task a curator at a museum has normally, as I am the creator of these social contexts in which I act as a curator and I define the way, how and what I am curating.

For me as the curator of online contents, communicating, thus acting socially, represents a basic condition.

Being a curator means always taking personal responsibility, and my way of taking personal responsibility goes really very far.

These ways can be sometimes quite provocative. When I started 2003 the [R][R][F]200x--->XP – global networking project - <http://rrf200x.newmediafest.org>, I invited curators for participating and contributing, i.e. curating artists, artwork or contents. As the creator, realizator and curator of this project context, I dared to realize the idea of curating curators, thus the invited curator had to accept that another person, me as the chief curator, who was just an artist and no museum director or an otherwise relevant person in the art scene, had the supervision over their curatorial work.

Not many curators would have accepted a situation in which not they stood themselves in the general relevance, and in this way just a special type of curator was participating, that type who was accepting his position in a social context. Those who accepted opened, however, unique networking structures not only for themselves or the curated "material", but in first place also to the project they were invited to, and in general to a really relevant cultural perspective and practice.

Therefore curating curators, but also cultural institutions and organizations represented a particular challenge, and when I started that type of curating, I was not sure whether it might be successful, at all. It was an experiment with much positive perspective for a special type of working in social contexts, cross-culture, cross-social, cross-religion, cross-everything.

## 8-----

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

One-word responses:

1. an artist from video-art:
2. an artwork of video-art:
3. a musician:
4. a net-art artwork that had impressed you:

### **Wilfried:**

5. an artist from video-art: Unnur Andrea Einarisdottir (Iceland)
6. an artwork of video-art: Life's attraction by Laurent Pernot (France)
7. a musician: Eldad Tsabary (USA)
8. a net-art artwork that had impressed you: Get Real by Tiia Johansson (Estonia)

## 9-----

### **Gabriela / Irene:**

Some times it is said that "non-material arts", like digital ones, have not any personal "traces" or peculiar signs than can distinguish the artistic or human stamp behind it. What do you think about it?

### **Wilfried:**

I would say, this is simply nonsense. As long as computers are used as tools for artistic creations, the same stereotypes can be heard.

But a computer is not autonomously acting, its use is depending on the user and his control.

If the user is a creative person, his creativity will express itself most personally. Only if a user has just some poor mediocre talents, there will be no trace of his personality left, on the other hand the perception of art is always subjective, so it is also possible that the viewer does not recognize what he should see actually. It is just fatal if both have no talents.

The computer is a tool of a mass culture which is producing masses of everything. Not everybody who is able to hold a brush in his hand is also a painter.

I even think, a talented artist can express himself much better when he is using a computer as his artistic tool, and emotion can be transferred in an extraordinary way via electronic tools.

It is just on another level than usual.

**Gabriela / Irene:**

Do you think that the absence of materiality in the process that involved the creation in digital arts can made feel the artist a bit of anguish, due to a lost of contact with "earth", with material reality?

**Wilfried:**

Firstly, the substance and the nature of art is always " immaterial", whether analogic or digital, just the tools and the use of tools and media are different. So somebody, who is suffering from the absence of the immaterial, should not choose the way of being an artist, but become better a banker.

An artist who does not want to loose contact with "earth" completely, thus he wants to act more physically and feel the material will probably rather become a sculptor or is doing landart or something like that, another artist feels more predestined to paint, and another to work with electronic tools and do digital art. But there are also ways to work in physical space with digital technologies, for instance robotic art.

Artists are artists because they can deal with immateriality the way they do, digital art, or probably better, art which uses a computer as a tool, is probably less physical, but using a mouse is finally also a kind of physical action, without the computer as a tool could not be managed.

No, the essence of art remains always the immaterial, it does not matter whether one faces physical sculptures, a drawing, an digital image, a piece of interactive netart or what else.

**Gabriela / Irene:**

How is your evaluation of these years since your beginnings in this artistic phase at 2000 year? What positive, what negative, what do you see for the future?

**Wilfried:**

Indeed the year 2000 represented a completely new beginning, when after a terror attack in 1998, a several months lasting coma I started in 1999 learning programming languages as a kind of therapy in order to train my intellectual skills again, and I returned to art only via some redirections, but a new type of art, I was never practicing before, based now on my new knowledge of these programming languages.

The use of electronic media and digital technologies, the Internet which became really popular at that time, the use the communicating technologies and the possibilities to install contacts to all parts on the globe, and the option to act as a virtual artist, all these aspects have existential relevance to me. They let me survive physically and psychologically after the attack. It was that "virtual", that "immaterial" which had the relevance as I had basically lost the sense for the "material".

When I started in 2000 from point zero and published online my first project "A Virtual Memorial" – [www.a-virtual-memorial.org](http://www.a-virtual-memorial.org), I had no idea about what would come, no idea whether what I did would be art or "netart", I did it since there was the need to do it, and everything coming was resulting from this. I really returned to art and captured a new art genre, i.e. "netart" for me personally and explored the Internet and the related technologies for their artistic purpose. The result is manifesting itself in the gigantic art environment, entitled [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork]: ||cologne – [www.nmartproject.net](http://www.nmartproject.net), a framework in which I act as an artist in many different functions, functions I had no idea about before I started. When I face all what I have done since 2000, it seems to be



a kind of miracle to me, since nobody was thinking I would ever be able again to practice art in any way.

I regret, that I did not come earlier to that technology based art, and I had to search so many years for the proper artistic expression. But obviously, I needed to go through hell first until I found my personal destination, or at least a better destination than before.

I do not think, there is much negative to report since 2000. The Internet changed during the years (not to the positive, by the way), the conditions of working artistically with the Internet changed, as well, but this belongs to the "normal". Maybe to the negative has to be counted, that I am still not able to practice physical art due to certain psychological blockings.

The future is a strange theme, as I cannot plan on long term anymore and decide always spontaneously, from one day to the next, or one month to the next, but not from one year to the next.

Since 2003, I made myself more independent from Internet based art and focus my work very much on the moving image, i.e video, as I feel this is currently the best way to express my artistic intentions. Many of my videos are presented successfully on festivals. Last year (2006) I also found a new affinity to digital photography, which has much potential, from my point of view. As I feel also the need to organize and act within my networking context, I also will continue developing my Internet based activities further on, but a bit more reduced and less intensively than I did before. The rest will be a big surprise for me and the others.

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**Gabriela / Irene:**

Which are your next plans?

**Wilfried:**

This is a difficult question, I do not know actually.

I think it is not really possible to plan art. It does not follow strong logical structures. I change my perceptions continuously and make spontaneously new and different decisions.

Of course, it is not completely true, that I do not work on new ideas, but the time is not mature, yet, to talk about.

One field I try to work on is the return to physical art working, not the way I did before the attack in 1998, but a new form of physical art which is based on the new perceptions I made since 2000.

This, however, is less easy than I was thinking. There are still psychological blockings, and I also not sure whether I want to return to the conventional art system I would need to return to, a system which is restricting art and artists profoundly in most different ways.

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**Gabriela / Irene:**

What meaning had arts along your life?

**Wilfried:**

I have not just one artistic talent, but generally talents also in art forms like acting, dance, music, pantomime, divers instruments, composing and others. I had the chance to explore many of such talents during my life and followed course at schools and academies, but the strongest affinity and preference I had for the visual arts, as I am strongly visual person. While I was standing at the cross road, I always decided for visual art, the other art forms were always less relevant to me.

I live for art, the way I practice, I am connected to art through an indestructible love, I feel physically.

Art is for me no intellectual game, I love art, I love to deal with art, I love to deal with other artists individually or a curatorial process, for instance.

It was always art which let me survive.

Art always meant everything to me.

I cannot imagine to live without art,

I can imagine to live without technology, but not without art.

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**Gabriela / Irene:**

Finally, there is something that you would like to say for young people that begin in arts way?

**Wilfried:**

Yes, one good advice:

Artists should always follow their ideas and not try to assimilate to whatever, follow honestly the personal path and let allow nobody to restrict or limit their way and their creativity.

An artist should never forget--> it is him or her which has cultural relevance, the artists have the power.

Curators, galleries and museums would not exist if there would be no artists, many people would be unemployed without the artists.

So, be self-confident and determine the course of your life yourself, and do not let other people do it.

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**Gabriela / Irene:**

Thanks al lot for the opportunity you give us to talk with Plastica-Argentina.

**Wilfried:**

It was a pleasure for me to express some of my ideas and thoughts by answering these questions. Thanks also from my side.