

"A Virtual Memorial"

A Memorial as a process – A Model of the World

by Wilfried Agricola de Cologne

A short cut

A Virtual Memorial represents an Internet based art work created in Flash5, Javascript and HTML by Agricola de Cologne, media artist from Germany. The project is based on the artist's physical Memorial project "A Living Memorial Spaces of Art" which had been initiated on occasion of the 50th return of World War II in 1995 and created and realized in 43 installations at 43 places in Poland, Czech Republic and Germany until the end of 1998. The ongoing virtual Memorial project has Internet specific aims and purposes. Comparable to the expansion of the Universe an expanding virtual sculpture is developing continuously.

Main part

When I published the project "A Virtual Memorial – Memorial project against the Forgetting and for Humanity" on 01.01.2000 in Internet on www.a-virtual-memorial.org, the first day of the new Millenium represented for me as an individual and an artist and for the project, as such, a symbol in many ways.

It represented a new beginning, a new phase in my professional and private life.

In "A Virtual Memorial", I did not realise some intellectual ideas in a new medium, a new environment. It represents rather a resumption of an artistic project which determined my professional and private life since 1989: **A Living Memorial Spaces of Art** – a Memorial project, I realised in 43 installations at 43 different

places in Poland, Czech Republic and Germany in physical space and in co-operation with public and museal institutions of the respective countries between 1995 and 1999.

All things which happened on the way to and during the running Memorial project represents the basis, history and the actual condition for creating A Virtual Memorial.

For being able to understand the background and motivation for this project in virtual space, it is becomes necessary to take a look closer on the history.

In European, but even more in German history the result of the World War II, i.e. the division of the world into two ideological and political systems, the division of Germany into two individual states marked the post-war decades. This construction guaranteed for many year a period without major conflicts and nobody was seriously thinking that anything could change. But it changed dramatically in 1989, when the Wall in Berlin fell, and as a result of that, the whole Communist systems in the East collapsed, as well, and all this took place in a peaceful revolution.

1989 was for me a year of dramatic changes, as well, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the later following German re-unification played a central role. In 1989, I had founded ARCHA Society Foundation, a charitable society aimed to cultural exchange, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall represented an unexpected perspective on focussing an engagement in the East of Europe.

I did not know what would occur to me, but certainly not being confronted with the German history 1939–1945 when I visited Poland 1990 for the first time. Although I had never been there, there was a spontaneous feeling of being home. The people living there touched me profoundly. Poland became my favourite country for the coming years.

Until 1996, I visited the country more than 14 times. But being confronted with the German history, I realized for the first time the dimensions of Nazi dictatorship and terror. The visits of historical places like the former Concentration Camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek or the former Gestapo prisons of Krakow and Warsaw, produced a lasting shocking effect, which became even stronger while learning more about individual Jewish and Polish people, suffering from the inhuman Fascist system.

Travelling in the East Poland, a typical settling region for Jewish people for many centuries (at many places the Jewish population had a majority of 60 and even more percent), it became evident, that in the beginning the

Nazis and later also Polish people eliminated any traces of Jewish living. So, I started a search for traces of Jewish life firstly in Poland, later also in Germany, Czech Republic and Hungary.

The result of that represents more than 50 documentary photographic projects of documents of Jewish culture, mainly focussing European Jewish cemeteries, because they mainly survived.

One of my professional contacts in Poland was the one to the State Museum of Majdanek, which is administering the former Concentration Camp of Majdanek (Lublin).

The first visit and later sojourns as a guest of the museum – with a guest room on area of the concentration camp – had an enormous "inspiring" effect. The nights in absolute loneliness and silence were imaginative in a not yet known dimension. And it were these nights, that inspired me to the idea to create an exhibition especially for Poland in connection with closer coming 50th return of World War II in 1995.

Looking for partners in Poland and organising such an exhibition seemed to be much easier than transforming ideas connected to Holocaust into artistic documents. Holocaust was not "more" than a catch word, an anonymous and indefinable mass. A catch word for the result of a genocide of incredible dimensions blasting all boundaries of human spirit. It represents the result of processes on different areas all initiated to exterminate human beings on basis of an insane ideology.

No, Holocaust did not represent anything constructive and had nothing creative in it, it made speechless causing the colours bleach out and let all sounds mute. It was absolutely not possible to visualize "Holocaust", any attempt had to fail, like any artists' attempt failed.

An artistic solution had to be found elsewhere but not visualizing the horror of the Past which most people did not experience personally and had no immediate affection to it. To touch people, they ought to be able to identify themselves with what they are looking at.

I found my artistic solution in the Present, the Neo-fascist manifestations which took place not only in Germany but in all countries of the world and a confrontation with this actual news with the historical National-Socialism of and its effects on society and humanity which had – under the giving historical circumstances – the chance to initiate processes which lead to Holocaust.

AGRICOLA de Cologne Papers & Articles

A Virtual Memorial

I was interested in these processes because observing them would be a chance eventually to learn for the Future. For me, it was the only possible solution, which, however, surprised many people who expected a revue of horrifying curios. "The title of the exhibition was well chosen: *"1000 years, 50 years and still so terribly young"*.

This exhibition had been shown firstly in January 1995 in co-operation with the City of Cologne and afterwards touring in Poland for one year and shown in co-operation with 10 Polish museums, including State Auschwitz Museum and State Majdanek Museum as my personal contribution to the reconciliation between the Germans and the Jews and German and Polish people on the other hand.

In my life, never prominent people had any influence on what I was doing. Ignatz Bubis, the late President of Central Jewish Council of Germany (died in 1999), represents the only exception. He influenced particularly my artistic life, because he took Patronage over this Polish exhibition, which catapulted this project on a level which the public had to notice.

A non-German does not know that exactly during these times a lot of public discussions in Germany were running about Memorials for the victims of Holocaust, I absolutely did not agree with. It was the Patronage which encouraged me and the actual social circumstances in Germany which motivated me to make conceptions of my own for an artistic Memorial which was not the result of rotten com - promises. This happened while the exhibition in Poland was touring and I tried to interest cultural institutions in Germany for my ideas of a mobile and expanding Memorial project, which had the aims to initiate processes inside of the viewer which could lead to a kind of Memorial inside through reflection. The process had the relevance not a static result. The physical part of that work consisted rather of associations of different kinds.

This developing Memorial project should consist of several complexes which would be dedicated to certain basic colours (blue, green, red, brown etc) and the connected symbolism, and they should be connected to certain aspects of historical and actual relevance, thus again a confrontation of Past and Present. The title of the Memorial project was: A Living Memorial Spaces of Art - Memorial project against the Forgetting, Racism, Xenophobia and Antisemitism, thus the subject and the aims were defined very clearly.

But I did not develop mere nice theoretical ideas, but conceptions made for being transformed into practice. In the beginning, institutions in Eastern Germany (former GDR) were interested in collaborating and prepared to participate in an artistic process.

It was the idea to transform certain public spaces which were not connected to any art into Spaces of Art by installing a certain part of the Memorial project during a temporarily limited period. This had the effect that the location changed its meaning and identity at least while the art space existed. It was the meaning, to install the different parts of the expanding project again and again at always changing places, so that the discussion around the aims and the purposes of the project, the occasion for a public commemoration was permanently cooking.

The basis of this expanding project represented the exhibition which was still touring in Poland as Brown Space (subject: ideological blindness) the main colour of the exhibition environment was Brown (among other Brown represents a symbol for the Nazi ideology is identified with), later joint the colours Blue (for example symbol for Israel: a variety of subject: religious persecution, eugenics

AGRICOLA de Cologne Papers & Articles

A Virtual Memorial

etc), Green (persecution of Jews and documents of Jewish culture) and Red (subject: resistance) other colours were planned but did not come to realisation.

All project complexes have a number of basic images producing an effect of recognition and identification.

The ideal artistic medium represented photography with all its creation possibilities from documenting to experimenting or combining with other artistic media.

Being honest, in the beginning institutions in Western Germany did not dare to present a project where only a vague conception existed from.

The institutions in the Eastern part of Germany were more open and curious what might come. The "unfinished", always an experiment, an essential of my project was a kind of challenge, which could be successful or failing.

They accepted to be a part of an ongoing process, not only artistically but subject related processes, as well. After the tour in Poland ended, this new Memorial project started to be shown in the Eastern part of Germany, later in Western Germany as well, and Czech Republic. Until the end of 1998, 43 Spaces of Art had been installed, each one differently from another.

One have to consider that during four years, nearly each month the opening of an other installation took place at always different places, which represented for the artist a non-comparable challenge and an extremely exhausting task, also because the local installations were created in spontaneous actions, sometimes a "performance work" developed. And nearly all events were connected with lectures, for example.

Compressed to a few words, all this might give an impression, all this was done very easily and represented the most normal thing of the world. However, it was not.

There were different "existential" aspects. To dedicate oneself entirely to such a project, to such a process, the conditions had to be this way, that one could earn one's living through the work. In a normal artist's situation, this represents a difficult task, already, but I succeeded to manage this, anyway.

The Patronage of Ignatz Bubis, represented on one hand much reputation for me and my project, on the other hand, being of public interest was a cause for hostile, antisemitic reactions, I received frightening anonymous letters and telephone calls.

All this was anything else than pleasant, because those reactions came also from friends and family members. I experienced nearly everything besides physical attacks or an assassination as an high-light.

In a certain way, I was always prepared to defend myself and fight, a kind of situation of war (in times of absolute freedom and peace). which lasted as long the project was running.

It seemed to be only consequent that sometimes something horrible would happen. However, nobody is prepared when the horrible happens in reality. So neither was I.

AGRICOLA de Cologne Papers & Articles

A Virtual Memorial

In September 1998, I had created an installation of the Blue Space at a former synagogue in Southwest Germany. It was a large spatial construction consisting of a variety of objects and elements. It was some hours before the official opening should take place, when the installation was destroyed by a terrorist attack of rightwing extremists. There is not the place for going in details, but the attack and the circumstances had disastrous effects on my physical and psychical health I am still suffering from.

I realised immediately, that my professional life, everything I made before was finished, everything had lost any value, I would never be able to work artistically at all. Therefore there was nothing else to do than cancelling all the plannings I had arranged for the coming years.

How to go on? It was nearly hopeless, because nobody wanted to be confronted with my problems. There was nobody I could talk with. All the good friends, where had they been?

So, in all the despair, I cut off all contacts. Point zero. Now I knew now how persecuted Jews in Nazi Germany might have felt, but this was no consolation, of course. After several weeks, all vital functions refused and I fell for some time in a kind of coma . And after I returned to life, I had to learn the essentials of life first again like eating, drinking and walking, and I did not know what to do, since I was not able any more to do any physical art work and above all, I had lost the sense for the material.

Sometimes, I started leaning computer programming languages, but rather as a kind of self-prescribed therapy, later I went over to New Media and the Internet became more and more relevant. Being busy with these new technologies had a positive effect because I had a good affinity to their logical structures.

In Spring/Summer of 1999, the war and genocide in Kosovo began to escalate and remembering my previous Memorial project I felt that I had to become active anyhow again. No, another genocide executed by a master race (the Serbs) must not happen. For me the previous Memorial project was finished and I felt unable to start working artistically like I did before.

Therefore my considerations were how I could use this knowledge of New Media to be creative again in an artistic sense. I experimented a lot, created an Internet presence and found out that this virtual environment was just I was looking for. Finally sometimes, I found Flash as an ideal programming environment for working artistically, that I was able to publish on 01.01.2000 A Virtual Memorial - Memorial project against the Forgetting and for Humanity

www.a-virtual-memorial.org

Did I fight with myself during all the year 1999 whether I should end or continue my life, that date represented the turning point, because I decided for life and this meant a new beginning, developing slowly new structures in handling all day and professional life.

In A Virtual Memorial, I continued the ideas of a mobile Memorial, a never ending work in progress, a Memorial which becomes one only through the activity of a visitor, viewer or user. This activity is also the condition for becoming deeper involved in the subject matter and reflecting about it , which finally represents the condition for the development of an internal living Memorial.

AGRICOLA de Cologne Papers & Articles

A Virtual Memorial

The new Memorial project was consequently planned as an ongoing work using the rules and structures of the Internet, changing continuously in the outer form and shape, i.e. design and kind of visualisation, as well as following latest technological developments through updates and transformations.

The Internet as a virtual platform represents not only a mere simulation of the physical world, but has structures and rules of its-own. One essential represents special kinds of communication and interaction.

Different from the previous physical Memorial project, the conception of the virtual project is adjusted to the environment of Internet and its rules. Therefore the aims are more general and are addressed to the entire global community, i.e. people on all continents and countries, of all religions and cultures, to subjects all people in the world could identify with. The viewer/user has to be active, but the virtual environment offers much more far-reaching possibilities to become active. Interactivity on different levels addressed to two groups of people.

1. Artists who can be directly actively involved by joining and participating in the project as such and in collaborative projects which are continuously organised with changing subjects.
2. the non-artist who uses the interaction created by collaborative processes

Thus interaction is not reduced to usual website related interaction, but an interaction which includes the whole database, not of the project solely but the entire Internet, as well.

On the other hand, this networking aspect produces and enforces interactivity by initiating processed between different levels of perception, an exchange between inside and outside, between different real, physical and virtual levels.

Because the project represents a highly developed multi-media environment, the options for initiating or calling associations are continuously increasing.

The project uses the Internet as resource and database in different concerns. There are an increasing number of links to subject related websites and contents which serve as a basis for creating associations and in the final result entire images or the image of the project as such.

The user can determine by himself what kind of (external and internal images) he will initiate, by visiting and using all the links and connected informations or not.

The ability to produce internal images is individually differently developed, it depends on the experiences the user has made, the ability of sensual perception and above all the openness of the user which depends what kind of information he filters in which way or not.

It is the active user who determines the spectrum of matter an image may consist of.

This expanding networking on different kinds of levels creates an expanding virtual sculpture, comparable to what we know about the development of the Universe since the big bang.

Although the thematic spectrum of A Virtual Memorial is reduced to three central aspects, i.e. Remembering, Repressing and Forgetting, it includes, nevertheless all areas of human living, related to Past, Present and Future. These three aspects mark the kind of point of viewing or handling things.

AGRICOLA de Cologne Papers & Articles

A Virtual Memorial

A Living Memorial took only a small (but anyway most important) slice of the cake connected to humanity by regarding Nazi -Terror and Holocaust, which served as an occasion to take the chance to reflect about life, about human behaviour and humanity as such and in this way to reflect about one's own position.

The kind of becoming active was reduced to moving around and by doing this initiating internal and external processes intending to initiate an open image or Memorial inside.

The physical environment created certain space which enforced initiating processes through the artistic installation. The viewer did not become active in the sense to take influence on the work. The user of the virtual platform takes this influence in different ways.

A Virtual Memorial represents in this way a kind of framework consisting of collective memory, the definition of space which represents collective memory as such.

Was the space created by the physical project (even if it was a large one), a rather intimate environment where the visitor could move through and communicate intimately, the virtual space offers a large scale of identification with the situation. Sitting lonely in front of the monitor of his PC represents a strong element of intimacy on one hand, and the consciousness of moving within an nearly endless environment of the Internet enforces the feeling of being anonymously connected with the global community which is sitting online at the same moment.

Thus, intimacy and distance simultaneously, physically and emotionally. A Virtual Memorial offers many perspectives for an artist to become involved and thus to become active. "Collaborative art working" represents the magic word.

In a collaborative art works the artist submits himself to a higher purpose of the work to be created. Such a work can have a lot of power by composing and melting the artistic experiences to the unity of a whole.

For the user, such works offer a lot of associative capabilities because he is confronted with a variety of different aspects around a certain theme or subject.

This works in the sense of the aims of the Memorial project to create and initiate, for example: tolerance and variety.

A Living Memorial was with no doubt the work of a single artist, even if also here 'variety' represented a central aspect. Although the authorship of A Virtual Memorial is also without any doubt clear, going deeper in the subject matter this authorship and thus the individuality of the creator loses clearness and sharpness. The creation of the project includes a permanent play between the authoring artist and the collaborative and non-collaborative user: what is real and what is unreal or virtual. The fast increasing volume of the project makes it nearly impossible to judge what comes exclusively from the author and what are collaborative elements and what is definitely the work of an external participant.

In both projects, the continuous changes play the relevant role. This is certainly more difficult concerning a physical art object than making any changes to files sitting on one's computer. The changes have a lot of effects: the object remains interesting or actual and invites

the visitor to view it again and again, and it represents the aspect of the not yet finished, of an ongoing process the viewer is participating in, thus a contradiction to the conventional understanding of what an object of art represents.

In principle, change represents the most normal thing since the natural processes of life represent change. Change is the only ever lasting thing. Why should art, which often enough is identified with life, be different from life and represent the most unnatural thing, a final result?

This seems to be more an invention of art critics in order to create non-existing scientific judgeable structures.

Anyway, the Internet and its rules actually demand applications which can be updated and thus change regularly. A website which does not find visitors has no sense at all. The sense of a website is to visit it again and again, but only a website will provoke continuous interest of the user, if there are continuously changes/updates on different levels.

The really successful sites fulfill these purposes. An art project in Internet has to act the same way, although this can be a difficult task to find one's visitors. Because a web-based work can honestly not be displaced to the physical environment, because it would lose its identity and thus the right to exist, the artist as well as any other people have to create an environment which is of interest of any kind of visitors, who visit the respective site or work again and again. It represents a part of an artistic work to create that kind of structures without losing the purpose of the project and the meaning of what art represents, as such.

Networking or installing networks represents another essential of any Internet work. Networking to be created means that participating parties depend on each other.

A Virtual Memorial uses this aspect consequently in different concerns, to mention only a few aspects:

Creating a kind of open community through memberships on a complete voluntarily basis, to organise competitions in order to create collaborative works by involving participants of different kind and binding these people to the Memorial through actions of different kind, a kind of magazine (, for example: the main project of the year 2001, entitled: "Features of the Month") presents monthly changing subjects with new multi-media works of artists (or mainly the authoring artist?), and collections of subject related links to any area of the Internet and there is a comprehensive expanding link section connected to subjects which are related to the aims and purposes of the Memorial project, or not at all.

By regarding that the installation of a network is not restricted to external areas, but is extending also over internal levels of reflecting, emotions etc and all this connected to the people who is involved online or offline in the project then it becomes clear that a multi-dimensional networking construction is developing comparable to structures of a brain or as mentioned before, the Universe.

The difference between the physical and the virtual project manifests itself in the different dimensions of the intended Memorial to be produced:

A Living Memorial Spaces of Art to initiate a very personal, individual and intimate Memorial inside of the viewer as a kind of living moral instance.

AGRICOLA de Cologne Papers & Articles

A Virtual Memorial

A Virtual Memorial going far beyond that to create both, the intimate moral instance and the environment in which this moral instance is embedded in.

Both projects complete each other, both represent ongoing processes, both represent a model of the world in their own way.

Wilfried Agricola de Cologne

media artist & New Media curator from Cologne/Germany
is the author, creator, producer and editor of

A Virtual Memorial

Memorial project against the Forgetting and for Humanity
www.a-virtual-memorial.org

which is a corporate part of
[NewMediaArtProjectNetwork]:||cologne
www.nmartproject.net

The experimental platform for art and new media founded by Wilfried Agricola de Cologne

URLs

Women: Memory of Repression in Argentina

<http://argentina.engad.org>

Family Portrait

<http://familyportrait.engad.org>

New Media Fest - festival environment of A Virtual Memorial

www.newmediafest.org

detailed biography on

<http://www.agricola-de-cologne.de/>

written in July 2001

revised in November 2007

copyright © 2001 by Agricola de Cologne. All rights reserved.