

Agricola de Cologne - A Virtual Memorial Phnom Penh 2012

Background

'Wilfried Agricola' died in 1998 in a terrorist attack. Can you tell me more about this event and the subsequent 'rebirth' of Agricola de Cologne?

This is really a very complex matter and I have not the time to explain things again in detail, therefore I would like to point to following links which may give you at least partially an answer

http://downloads.nmartproject.net/commemorating_victims_by_AGRICOLA.pdf

<http://www.labforculture.org/en/members/ana-peraica/51521/21430>

How has the brand changed since 2000?

Launched on 1. January 2000, "Agricola de Cologne" became alive as a brand and virtual artist in a symbolical act. A brand gets its meaning in the context of a corporate design. The brand "Agricola de Cologne" is standing for a wide range of cultural products and his artistic program, which does not exclude, that "Agricola de Cologne" would be used once as a brand like "Eau de Cologne". The brand symbolizes also, that the virtual artist is actually a product, and everything which is visible or perceivable is representing just an image, the image. The physical person behind does actually not exist, but is manifesting itself just a few times a year in physical space.

But the brand and the meaning of the brand did not change. That's also the meaning of a brand.

Would you describe yourself as a performance artist?

No, not at all, such kind of categorizations do not fit. One may consider me as a multi-disciplinary artist, but in fact, I am a virtual artist, this is including also the virtual curator and festival director, and all the other roles I am playing, like the programmer of all my websites and webprojects, the multi-media developer and much more.

Who were your inspirations, artistic or cinematic, when you were starting out?

One needs to differentiate my different lives, the first one until 1998 and my death as a physical artist, and my second life as a virtual artist since 1.1.2000.

My first life started when I was 15 years old, and at that time the perception on contemporary art were completely different than today, of course, the inspirations came from the visual artists movements of the 19th and early 20th century and some after World War II.

My second life as an artist was inspired by the urgent need for exploring the unknown, i.e. Internet and new technologies and an immaterial view on life and art. In the context of this exploration also the strong affinity for art and moving images came into the foreground and the perception, that this was actually what I was

always searching for, in times, when the civilisatory and technological development wasn't so far, yet.

How would you describe your personal aesthetic as artist? And as curator?

I always wanted to initiate processes, as the result of people being confronted with my art, this was good already when I was starting, but I was following always my own rules searching for the non-experienced, the unknown and new perceptions., I never wanted to be an artist who is administrating a status-quo, i.e. his own death. All this is good also for me as a curator, where, one needs to understand, that I consider curating as one of my basic current artistic expressions. How can aesthetics of diversity be described?

What's your creative process?

When I have an idea, I start simply. It is not my way working out endless concepts. Learning by doing. Experimenting, getting inspired by new perceptions. I do never ask, whether I am allowed to do anything, I simply do it. Of course, one cannot generalize, sometimes I have a certain goal in mind which I want to reach, sometimes, just a vague idea, or no idea exists, yet, where my way is leading me to. Once a creative process is initiated , one can speak of a consequent development through itself. I am acting instinctively, sometimes like in trance. I follow a kind of internal voice. Mostly, I even even see this process as as the actual art work. Most of my projects are works in progress.

Where did you study? Has video-art and film always been your passion or did you start out working with more traditional forms?

I am a kind of dinosaur, threatened with extinct. When I studied art in Stuttgart, Munich and Amsterdam between 1969 and 1978, nobody knew anything about new media or digital revolution. Technology as a basis for artistic media did not exist, at all, something which does not exist cannot be one's passion. I was never really happy and was looking for movement in the static art media, but I had many different artistic talents and my parents made it possible to me to explore all of them, so, for instance, while I was studying in Munich history of art, I went at the same time to an actor school, had singing and dancing lessons for many years, just to find out that I was not made for that kind of reproductive art and returned to the creative visual arts by starting again studies in Amsterdam.

The word computer did not even exist, yet, and nobody could foresee, at all, the revolutionary technological developments later on. I studied, of course, old media, like painting. or the printing techniques like lithography etc.

Even when VHS video entered the art scene in the seventies of 20th century, I never liked that type of video art, and I still do not like that. I do not like the medium of analogioc video, nor its limited artists use and expressions and aesthetics.

I always liked cinema, but as a consuming amateur, I had never a secret dream to become a film-maker once, because I never saw filmmaking as a medium for me. As I described earlier, I came to digital video via the multi-media programming in my artistic Internet based projects, which all are interactive.

You term 'Agricola de Cologne' a brand; is there any problem with using the language of commerce in reference to art?

There is probably the misunderstanding, a brand would be necessarily related to commerce. A brand is a part of a corporate design, and so it is my case as well, only that my corporation is not representing a commercial instance, but a cultural immaterial instance, consisting of different cultural and above all, virtual aspects. However, it includes also an option to expand to the physical commercial area, it may happen, when time is mature, or not, at all.

You discuss Renaissance practices when explaining why you chose the name Agricola. Why are humanist values important to your work?

Humanist values are important to me, and to someone who is identical with his work, these values are not only part of my identity, but represent also the motivation to do what I am doing.

One aspect of the humanist idea is representing the universal mind or personality, so a person who is carrying everything inside. In our times this is a kind of utopia, but in Renaissance times it was possible to collect all knowledge of mankind in one person, think of Leonardo da Vinci. My broad interdisciplinary artistic background makes me think in other, more universal terms and contexts.

In terms of art, the humanist ideas manifest themselves in different ways, for instance in the contents, i.e my interest in humanitarian issues, but also in practice by dedicating my activities to an audience, by activating people, using art for creating social contexts etc.

You have spoken about modern-day Utopias; do the Renaissance Utopias of Thomas More and Martin Luther have any relevance today? Do they have any relevance to new media artists?

Of course, one cannot transfer these utopias 1:1 to our times, but their essence placing the human being & the Creation in the centre, as someone who has the ability to take responsibility over the progress of the CREATION. In this sense, these utopias are nowadays more contemporary and more important than ever, since mankind, generally, is standing at a crossroad, not just one crossroad, but many crossroads concerning essential decisions about the future of mankind of our planet. It is really one of the basic questions how we humans deal with ourselves. I think, these ideas have particular impact on new media artists, since many of them think about their actual purpose and the purpose of their use, such artists form a new type of artists, who practice new forms creativity in a network, who feel that art as one of the most relevant human expressions, at all, has to be shared among all of us, not only as a common value, but also in the sense that the artistic language is a universal one. Since many new media artists can be characterized as activists in most different ways, activists also, in developing new artistic concepts in networks, which have a social relevance and do not practice art for its own sake. Art not as a elitist issue or a kind of luxury, but as an essential human expression for communicating on different sensual levels.

Virtual media and downloading pose a grave threat to many artists' livelihoods; what led you to embrace these democratic (and often financially unprofitable) forms of art?

One of the lasting "negative" results of the terrorist attack and the coma has been the loss of the sense for the "material", especially in art. I have no real connection any more to physical art, and in most forms of physical art I see no sense, any more. That's also one reason, why I do not visit museums, since they are filled with physical art. Turning to the virtual, which was only possible at that time, when the Internet became popular in 1999, was the only way to survive as an artist, but also as a human being, and this became my very special own way. But dealing with the Internet as an artistic medium, was bringing automatic all features into the foreground, like participatory, collaborative and networking activities, forming a community of two or more artists, in this sense I was developing since 2000 my own artistic community or network which is representing the basis of all my activities. To these very Internet specific features belongs also curating, as special form of taking responsibility in such networking contexts. The basic idea behind all these activities, is sharing a common pool of information, acting on an equal non-hierarchical level and not related to one's own "ego", but to the higher goal of taking responsibility in the framework of the community. This has very much to do with practicing democracy in the early primitive forms of society, when the community was forming the context and the tool for surviving. As for art, it is not any longer elitist, but becomes a common value of sharing information, knowledge, emotions etc, so also art is going back to its roots. I am very happy, that the new technologies were really forcing us to return to the essential of human existence, where art is and was playing always a most relevant role as a medium for transferring memory to the future.

"A Virtual Memorial"

You have used the term 'project interventions' in reference to "A Virtual Memorial". Do you see art as having such a determinedly therapeutic social role?

I think, also in terms of art, we are at a cross road. How art, how contemporary art is perceived nowadays, is dominated by ancient views by art historians, art critics or so-called experts, who have for themselves no idea of any artistic process.

But, even they were speaking of art as a medium for communicating in times, when no new technologies were existing, yet. Even they speak of art having an essential social role. Whether it is playing a therapeutic role, it is a matter to be discussed, yet, but art was always playing a kind of therapeutic role,

When people feel well or miserable, emotionally or mentally affected, while being confronted with art, it has even a therapeutic effect if people collect art just for making profit, since when they are making profit they feel satisfied in one or the other way. This way, art is leaving completely its path of being elitist.

The collective trauma of the holocaust has had a huge impact on the creation of the modern Jewish identity. Do you see any similar sort of effect in Cambodia? Does this collective memory unite or divide young Cambodians?

I think, one cannot compare Jews and Cambodians as peoples.

While the Jews were leading a diasporadic life for many hundred years, it was just this diasporadic aspect, which were forcing the Jew to develop such a strong identity or

getting lost completely by assimilating on this diasporadic tour around the globe. Persecutions and programs expulsion or killing people were part of this diasporadic life, so the Holocaust must be seen in this context, since one might even speak of a kind of driving power which was enabling the Jews to create a state and territory of their own. The people in Cambodia have obviously a completely different history and the condition for the genocide were completely different.

But the Holocaust and the Cambodian genocide have much in common on the other hand, both started from totalitarianism, and all type of totalitarian systems are the same, all over the world, since the human character is the same, no matter how different the cultural, religious or ethnic context is.

The way, how people were persecuted and killed were completely different, but the effects caused by these genocides and traumas and the human issues, in general, are again similar or identical.

It depends on the mentality of the Cambodian people and how open and offensive they are dealing with the collective trauma, whether it will unite young Cambodians:

How did Riga audiences react to "A Virtual Memorial"? What have the reactions of Holocaust survivors been?

It was a kind of new issue, since only since some years, the Latvians started to overcome their national trauma, which is not only the collective trauma related to Jews, but the occupations by the Germans and Russians, causing also countless victims among the non-Jewish Latvians, especially during the Stalinist times. So this is a very complicated and sensitive matter, but it was indeed like that, that the event in Riga had an activating effect on the people, who suddenly started talking about issues which they were not talking about before.

In the moment when the event, the artists' talks and discussion took place, and afterwards, of course, the project cannot be more than a mosaic stone in the context of a big puzzle, but a most relevant little stone according to all feedback, I received. In Latvia, there are hardly any Holocaust survivors, since nearly all Jews were killed as the result of the Holocaust. There may be some very old people still living, but I did not meet any. The currently Jewish Community in Latvia is consisting basically of Jews returning or emigrating to Riga, for instance from Russia.

What are the differences between Cambodian trauma and that associated with the Holocaust?

This is really a difficult question, since actually the differences concerning history, geography, economy, culture, religion etc., are too profound to be compared with each other. A big difference were the ideologies of the totalitarian systems. While the Nazis were practicing the industrial extermination of humans, thus the latest civilisational developments in technology made this type of extermination only possible, in Cambodia the Red Khmers were rooted on a kind of stone age communist ideology which wanted to erase the intellectual elite from its roots and create people of an equal level of uneducatedness and barbarism. Although completely differently structured, the Nazis had something similar in mind.

Can the same art works be equally valid in such different cultural contexts?

Are there any statistics about this question? I think an answer is only possible after having presented such art works in different cultural contexts. I have no idea about Cambodia. So, I only can hope, that my ideas are equally valid there, it is an experiment.

Aren't younger artists presenting an interpretation of past events rather than a memory, per se?

I think all people who are not directly witnesses of incidents, are interpreting information about such incidents from the media or other sources. Concerning young artists, the distance of time, can cause a more "objective" point of view, also in dealing with the sources of information. On the other hand, young people, do not feel bound to conventions and stereotypes related to such traumatic incidents and have a more open and creative view on the circumstances, which allow new approaches.

In the intro to "A Virtual Memorial Phnom Penh" it says that 'freedom of memory is the only true freedom', as it is unbound by convention. Does this imply we are also free to forget, if we so choose? If so, is a freedom to wilfully forget in contradiction to the pieces in "A Virtual Memorial"?

Usually after having experienced such traumatic incidents the mind of affected people is switching off any memory automatically, as a kind of survival strategy and self-protection. This is really no conscious decision, but also later such a conscious decision is not possible, since memory remains always alive in the unconsciousness. Repressing actively memory, which is not impossible, however may have most fatal effects, for instance, in form of a deep depression. After lying in an coma for several months and returning to life, any memory of the terror attack on me was like erased, and after more than year, this memory returned in form of a post-traumatic depression, which was leading me close to death over a longer period. Only after a therapy lasting more than two years, I was able again to deal with the traumatic memory, but only because I accepted the terror attack as a an active part of my life and I did not repress memory. It is not possible to forget and it is not possible to heal the damages caused by the trauma, thinking it would be possible to forget or having that choice, at all, it is just an illusion, so "forgetting" does not represent any alternative.

"A Virtual Memorial" is aimed at 'activating' audiences; what kind of action do you envisage the exhibition catalysing?

In Phnom Penh, activating the audience will be basically done by presenting in my programs a diversity of artistic approaches via the videoart works, moderated by my person. I would wish if local artists would form a part of the audience, open for a discussion and talks. The workshop on Sunday is representing an intervention aimed to activate the local artists, also in terms of a future collaboration to be established.

Why is film/digital video an appropriate medium for collective memory?

The moving images are able to represent processes the audience or people can identify with, processes of human existence, a universal language.

Renaissance art made use of the *memento mori*, a reminder of death; does the video-art of “A Virtual Memorial” contain any modern interpretations of this trope? Or are they more reminders of life?

The programs of videoart to be presented in the context of *A Virtual Memorial* in Phnom Penh are compiled especially for Phnom Penh, showing a diversity of how artists from all over the world deal with memory. If there is a relation to Renaissance art, then in the diversity and universality. There are certainly also some examples of reminder of the death and life, but it is up to the audience give this issue any relevance.

Have you worked with any Khmer film artists to put this show together? If yes, can you tell me more about this process?

Collaborating with Meta House in Phnom Penh, is representing the first collaboration in Cambodia. There were no contacts to Khmer artist before, but it is one meaning of the event to change that and establish collaborations in future.

What’s your opinion on the Cambodian shorts which will be shown on the final night?

Unfortunately, I do not know, since I will review the films only when I am in Phnom Penh. Sorry.

General

Does virtual space offer more opportunities for artistic creativity than limited physical space?

According to my understanding the virtual and the physical are complementing each other, this is good for virtual and physical space, as well. The virtual space is expanding the existing limited possibilities of physical space. By using both options, unexpected possibilities come up.

What is an ‘experimental documentary’? Are documentary and expressive art contradictory in any way?

My activities around “moving images” are only related to art, but not cinema, even if “film” is used as a technical term. Experimental documentary refers to art as a human expression which is transporting memory, and in the given case in an experimental way. In terms of “art & moving images” it is representing a new format and an extension of art.

“A Virtual Memorial” poses the question of how to transform living memory into moving images. Are there any visual motifs which you find particularly effective in conveying the concept of memory?

Being as authentic as possible concerning the aim and mission to be transported through the images, this is certainly most effective and successful.

You have described industrialisation as a ‘dead-end’ because it excludes a survival strategy for mankind. Cambodia is currently industrialising and developing quickly; do you think technical advances in art can offer a survival strategy to counteract other advances in technology?

No, I do not think so, at least not on short notice. It would require a completely rethinking of all values in society and much time this way. I have no idea, whether the Cambodian society would be able. But it is surprising how new technologies in art take influence on alternative economical concepts in Western societies. The industrialisation in China, for instance, follows ancient capitalist ideas and is enormously destructive in many ways.

Are virtual communities as valid as the physical social structures they are replacing in modern life?

I think they are as valid, but both are complementing each other. My projects consist of a dual system consisting of equal virtual and physical components.

Art is often seen as the pursuit of individualism (in Western conceptions). Do you try to counteract that view via your participatory and multimedia approach to curating?

That's true.