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Interview to Wilfried Agricola de Cologne

(q is for question - a is for answer)

q

You started working on digital art following a personal traumatic event that was, in a way, linked to 'traditional' visual art. Is this break definitive and total? How much of your past has come with you in your new artistic life?

a

The break is total, but definitely? Who knows what will come. Any physical art has lost its actual meaning to me. I see it as a relict from ancient times. But as the trauma, you were talking about, did not produce a kind of amnesia, I did not loose my personal history, which is running hidden as a kind of data base in form of memory and perceptions.

In contrary to a new born child, all that takes deeply influence on my being and of course my artistic life, which is, by the way, identical with the non-artistic life, once an artist, always an artist.

q

Changing not only your approach to artistic creation, in terms of media and tools, but also your name, your identity, you created a sort of avatar for yourself.

How important is for an artist the chance to be virtually anybody, to start all over again from zero?

a

Although it is principally not bad at all, to start now and then from point zero – particularly when this is based of the decision of one's own, in my case it was not my decision, and it had really bad results.

Anyway, when I returned to art sometimes, I did it because it was not that kind of physical art as I practiced it before, but it was something new, not yet clearly shaped, something on a virtual level, a kind of life experiment.

The loss of the physical/material is one of the basic things which remains as a result of my traumatic experiences.

For me it was the only way to start the new way of art, to create a kind of virtual identity, retrospectively seen. It was not planned like that. It came more intuitively, just as anything I did in the early phase and even nowadays, was and is not planned.

q

How was it, practically, the passing from 'traditional' to 'digital'? Was it hard to learn using the tools of the digital artist?

a

There was really no passing from.. to.

My Old Media (and anyway experimental) related art ended abrupt without any warning from one minute to another...

When I approached the digital field a lot of time later, I hadn't art in mind first, and I started from an internally empty space, as there was simply nothing. On the other hand, it was this emptiness which represented the chance to start something completely new.

But the new, seemed anyway to be quite familiar. As it corresponded completely with certain internal structures of mine, I did it simply and learned this way by doing, so it was and it is always anything else than hard.

q

In a [interview](#) you gave to Seth Thompson on January 2003, you say "Agricola de Cologne is a 'brand' (...)".

What are your thoughts about globalization and the no-global scene? What's your idea of brands, copyright and freedom of expression in the electronic era?

a

"Globalization" represents really a very complex matter with a variety of facets.

People like me using the Internet and electronic communication take actively part in globalisation, the global net working represents an essential aspect of these activities offering new dimensions of chances in all directions...

Processes like globalisation or unifying, for instance in Europe, produce however, deeply fears inside of many people, they might loose their identity by assimilating to

something alien. In fact, the contrary is true. It offers chances while defining and sharpening the identity of one's own, people, regions, country.

The negative sides are very dangerous in concern of the natural environment on earth and not existing democratic structures, as there is no globally operating democratically elected administration which is ruling and controlling.

The current situation of globalized economics is in the state of the early capitalism, as there is no controlling instance, resulting exploitation of people and natural resources on a global level with disastrous effects.

Brands are part of the strategy of a corporate identity and are particularly used also by the large globally operating companies.

Artists brands are also nothing new. New, however, since the second half of 20th century is, that artists create the brands of their own, an expression of emancipation and independence. The difference between a brand of a company and an artist is actually only marginal.

In my case, there is an additional but fundamental component, as the use of my brand has rather a philosophical dimension, and represents further a citation and reflection about what a brand, but what I as an artist and the artist, as such, represents, and in this way the brand and its use represents an art creation and art action by its own, as well.

The instrument of a brand can also be very helpful in connection with the author's rights which are strongly endangered in the electronic era like the freedom of expression, as well.

Freedom, however, is nothing absolute, but relative. Freedom does not exist, as such, one has always to fight for it, this is particularly good as in all parts of the world, and the democratic Western countries are no exception, there are tendencies to restrict the freedom of expression and install a kind of more or less hidden censorship.

Each citizen is advised to be very observant.

q

I know you do not like categories and categorization when talking about art, but don't you think this time we need something to start with while trying to draw a map of the digital art scene?

Talking about [this topic](#), do you agree that the term net.art has won the race?

a

From all discussions, I follow connected to digital art or net based art, I get always the impression, nobody is talking about art, but fighting for some irrelevant things as names for categories.

It seems to me that many people who call themselves “Netartists” have no idea what art is, and therefore also no idea what netart is or could be.

Before anything else, “netart” is art. If it would be not art, I would not engage for it. What has to be discussed and defined in a new and dynamic way what art represents under the new conditions including all those new forms and components the digital fields offer.

This is my personal opinion.

Therefore, I prefer the term “net based art” before all other terms and categories, as it defines the particular kind of art as art, and not as a craft or new ability, like cooking or knitting a webpage.

q

In your text '[A Memorial as a process - A Model of the world](#)' you say about 'A Living Memorial':

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.

How important is the role of the user, the consumer of an artwork? Is the user the final artist?

a

First at all, art does not exist autonomously.

Art is a phenomenon which is connected to the human existence, which is a fundamental expression of human existence... No human, no art.

In principle, since the beginning of human civilisation, art (or what nowadays is defined as art) was a communicating medium. However, until the digital age, it was the artist who had the active, and the viewer who had more or less the inactive/passive part of reception.

In the digital fields, both artist and viewer become part of a complex network on different levels. The viewer becomes an active user, the artist leaves his formerly nearly god-like position (he had since [Renaissance](#) times) and becomes rather a kind of chairman, mediator within a network or initiator of a process, he can direct, manage or control, or not at all, the user responds/reacts on the initiated process or the offered material/options and has in so far influence on the course of process.

The real art work comes up inside of the user by reflecting, so the last step before the artwork takes shape before the user's eyes is nearly identical with the one of the passive viewer.

Artist and audience depend each other in any case.

q

You are at the [Venice Biennale's](#) 50th International Art Exhibition with your 'Wandering Library Project'. What's the project about?

What you think about the proliferation of events as the Venice Biennale (see the brand new [Prague Biennale](#))?

a

Yes, I participate with a small but anyway very engaged object. The idea behind the "Wandering Library" project (which has its exhibition location by the way in the [Jewish Museum](#) of Venice) is to point on one hand to the founder of book printing in Europe, [Gutenberg](#), and the meaning of printed books in the time of electronic media and the problems how to preserve the printed word and this way also intellectual property.

My object is entitled: "the book of violence" and refers to violence against the spoken and printed word, also connected to the structural problems caused by the digital media and the insecure preserving/storage possibilities.

I personally do not like such events as [DOCUMENTA](#) in Kassel, or other monstrous events, they all suffer from gigantism and the loss of quality of artistic contents (if there is any, at all).

These spectacular events give a completely wrong idea to the public about contemporary art working and on the other hand of art, as such. Art is used and misused for a kind of consumer fair, a monstrous market place, a kind of [Disneyland](#) where anything else is relevant than art.

On the other hand, such kind of events take all the money from the market available for culture, with the fatal effect that there is no money left for supporting smaller less prestigious projects, for art initiatives and individual artists.

In times of economical crises, the budgets for culture and art are cut first, but the dino-events survive because there is much economical interest behind.

Concerning Venice, I did not visit the Biennale even once. But the principle of this event seems to be structurally a bit different from others, so that at least a variety of different aspects (even if they are filtered, and in this way maybe even manipulated) can be experienced by the audience.

An ambitious and engaged project like "Wandering Library" would certainly not get so much public attention and attraction outside of the Biennale.

q

In December 1997 in an article called: ["The Artist of the Future Is a Technologist"](#), Steven Holtzman says:

[digital sensory experiences of the future] are already being created in research labs - elaborate virtual worlds powered with half a million dollars' worth of reality engines.

Ten years from now, we'll experience the same on the Web, and it will really knock our socks off.

Three years divide us from the 'ten years' date predicted, do you think the Web has taken that kind of direction?

a

No, indeed the Web has not taken such a kind of direction. Most of these kinds of ideas are nothing else than nice utopias.

It would be also too elitist and in this way completely unreal. Who ever would be able to participate?

Currently only a minority of the world population has access only to the lightest forms of technological progress. The majority is fighting each day in order to survive existentially.

If those ingenious inventors would work on instruments that people would not die of starving or lack of water, it would be possible maybe sometimes to create more equal conditions so that more people would be able to participate in simple technological progress, the access to Internet for instance.

q

You have been the curator for many net.art exhibitions, what's your approach to this kind of curatorship? Is there around a new generation of 'net.curators'?

a

I would say, I am a curator of "net based" art, and when you say "net.curator" I suppose you mean the same.

As I see it, such a curator must have skills in net based technologies in order to give the works to be curated a meaning, at all and to estimate the relation between technology (use of technology) and artistic expression, and of course also other forms of contemporary art.

The view is not reduced to certain external aesthetics.

The virtual environment is completely different from any physical space. Much more than in physical space the curator works for and with the audience, the user.

But in an ideal case, the curator should also have artistic skills and should be able to create net based applications by his own, especially when the curates exhibitions which should be embedded into a special online environment/interface.

Thus, curating on the net is not reduced to an individual subjective selection and writing probably some nice words for it.

q

Talking technical, you said that your favorite software is Flash (Macromedia Flash).

Do you write the code (Actionscript) yourself? What's your favorite version of that software? Do you collect previous versions of software as an old brush, or a (physical) palette?

a

I am looking always for a way to work most effectively and independently, but also for the challenge of new ways of representing.

From the beginning, I programmed, thus wrote my action scripts by myself, which does not exclude, that I do not inform myself now and then what is going on in the scene, which has sometimes even an inspiring effect.

I started with Version 4.0 of Flash and have since then all original software versions. However, I like most, the latest version: Flash MX.

Agricola de Cologne Quick Bio

Born **1950** in Black Forest (Southern Germany), died on 31.12.1998 as *AGRICOLA* as the result of a terrorist attack.

Reborn on **01.01.2000** as *Agricola de Cologne*, living and working as a free lance artist since **1984** in Cologne (Germany).

Agricola de Cologne interviewed by alessandro piana bianco
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More Agricola de Cologne:

more on Agricola de Cologne on his website: agricola-de-cologne.de

- [javamuseum](#)
- [le musée di-visioniste](#)
- [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork](#)
- [Service Centre](#)

Links quoted in this interview:

1. [Interview gave to Seth Thompson](#)
2. [“Net art, web art, online art, net.art?” by Andreas Brøgger on ON OFF](#)
3. [“A Memorial as a process - A Model of the world”](#)
4. [Renaissance definition on Wikipedia](#)
5. [Gutenberg definition on Wikipedia](#)
6. [Prague Biennale](#)
7. [Venice Biennale](#)
8. [Jewish Museum in Venice - Jewish Community in Venice](#)
9. [Documenta](#)
10. [Disneyland](#)
11. [“The Artist of the Future Is a Technologist” on wired.com](#)

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