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LEARNING FROM HISTORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH AGRICOLA DE COLOGNE

By Seth Thompson

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German-based media artist, Agricola de Cologne began his career as a painter when he finished his studies in 1978 at Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. Always experimenting, he became increasingly interested in spatial installations that incorporated photography and other media elements. He states that he was "searching for the limits in using media and in creating new contents." He had more than 100 individual exhibitions in cooperation with more than 70 museums throughout Europe until 1998, when he had said there was a "breaking point in his life."

The year 2000 brought great clarity to his vision resulting in a name change and new method to his work. He introduced a collective approach to his art production as an artist/curator/director with such projects as, *A Virtual Memorial*, and *Le Musee di-visioniste* that are part of his *NewMediaArtProjectNetwork*.

Agricola de Cologne is an artist who creates on-line social spaces. He also creates more traditional singular vision work that has been exhibited and showcased on many sites including [Wigged.net](#).

Looking at Agricola de Cologne's work, I realized that he is humanitarian on a quest for understanding a world that can be inhumane and indifferent. I have posed a few questions to Agricola de Cologne to better understand his art production. Below is a result of that dialogue:

In 1990, you traveled to Poland for the first time. Why did you go and what did you discover?

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist systems in Eastern Europe made it possible for me to organize an international conference about the current condition of art and culture. This conference took place in the city of G?litz near the Polish border. The city is divided into two parts like Berlin once was--a German and a Polish section. While preparing for the conference, I visited the Polish part of the city for the first time. There I found extremely kind and hospitable people--a beautiful country. In addition, I was confronted with the permanent impact of the Nazi era on Polish ground, which meant persecution, death and the Holocaust. Visiting the concentration camps including Auschwitz and Majdanek had a deep and lasting effect on me because I had no idea of the extent of human suffering that resulted under the ideological blindness and pressure of the Nazis. I found that there were no Polish families unharmed by the Nazis and later by the Russians under Stalin. Many personal and intimate stories of horror and terror intensified the personal impact on me. As a German, I have been constantly reminded of my country's history. Nevertheless, the Polish people that I had met saw me as an individual from the post-war generation and they did not blame me for the Nazi crimes.

I also learned that the Eastern part of Poland was for many centuries an established Jewish community; the Jews were the majority of the population. Traveling through this part of Poland produced unnerving realizations because everywhere I saw the Nazis had succeeded in eliminating any traces of Jewish habitation and culture. Nevertheless, a number of Jewish and Polish cemeteries survived the destruction of the Nazis. This unbelievable situation motivated me to start researching Jewish culture in Poland, Germany, Hungary and Czech Republic. I made more than fifty artistic photo documentations, mostly of Jewish cemeteries, since they were the only remnants of Jewish heritage that remained.

Reflecting upon that and much more, I came to the conclusion that I had to become active artistically. In 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, gave me the direction to become active. I wanted to create an art project for Poland marking the fiftieth anniversary that reflects the past and present. I also wanted to offer my project to Polish museums as my personal contribution to the German reconciliation with the Jews and Polish--a difficult task because it is said that many Polish are anti-Semitic, which I, however, cannot confirm from my own experiences.

Through my personal contacts in Poland, I succeeded in organizing my project as a touring exhibition that included ten Polish museums, among them the state museums of Auschwitz and Majdanek, but also Historical Museum of Krakow and many others: My project was entitled "1000 years, 50 years and still so terribly young". The title relates to the historical Nazi ideology of Hitler and its neo-fascist manifestations nowadays. Later this project became the basis of a very large multi-faceted memorial project, entitled *A Living Memorial - Memorial Project Against the Forgetting, Racism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism*, which had been presented until 1998 in 43 installations at 43 places in Germany, Poland and Czech Republic.

Why did you believe it was important to examine German history especially World War II?

Someone who is not accustomed with post-war Germany may not know that the history of World War II was not taught in school in Germany at that time in contrary to nowadays. The trauma of the 12 years of Hitler's "1000 year Reich" was too deep, nobody knew how to handle history under this regard, so it was the general policy to repress anything connected to the "Third Reich" -- Nazi history. During the nine years in school, I never had any lesson about this historical period. People in 1950's Germany focused on other priorities such as reconstructing living structures and rebuilding a healthy economy. As for cultural concerns, there was no time and no money and no consciousness. People of my generation grew up without a significant understanding of the Holocaust. Of course, this does not mean, that there were no publications about the period, or that the press did not report about trials connected with Nazi crimes etc, but most people closed their eyes and ears. I became aware of my history particularly by visiting the countries of Eastern Europe after 1989. I learned about the Nazi period and the events of World War II. I wondered how one of the leading cultural nations of the world turned to barbarism by following blindly an ideology of an insane and completely uneducated person--Adolf Hitler. Someone who would have read Hitler's "Mein Kampf" when it was published in the 1920s knew the ideas behind his ideology. Everything described in "Mein Kampf" happened several years later. Some intellectuals in Germany recognized immediately what the real meaning of this tractate was; many others who read it even several times did not understand anything at all, because they did not want to understand, or they were not able to understand the dimensions of terror and horror. So, understanding history can help one understand current political, economic and cultural developments. It can help to prevent repeating the same mistakes. Hitler had installed in record time a system of fear, terror and horror. Already the day after he had been elected Chancellor in 1933, he built the first "Concentration Camp" where he "concentrated" political opponents. It was only the starting point for all that would come later--the Holocaust and millions of deaths. Hardly believable -- but true.

In 1998, you experienced a traumatic event in your life. What happened and how did it impact your work and life?

Everybody is talking about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001. When I hear this date, it reminds me of my own personal nightmare on September 11, 1998. I received my very own personal terrorist attack executed by right wing/fundamentalist extremists on my installation at a former synagogue in South Western Germany.

It was no bomb attack, but an attack of brutal vandalism that destroyed my installation three hours before the exhibition opening. Although the culprits did not harm me directly, one immediate result was a physical heart attack. The destruction of my installation led to a series of illnesses that caused a decline in my health.

Since beginning my project *A Living Memorial*, I continuously received hostile reactions from many sides. Each day when I went to the mailbox, I was worried that a letter bomb would be waiting for me. It was, in a certain sense, a permanent state of terror.

When vandals attacked my work, I identified this immediately with the end, not only the end of that Memorial project but also, the end of my professional career since I felt I would never be able again to work artistically. I had become even closer to death than before-- everything material and everything physical had lost meaning.

Nevertheless, it is not the place to mention all these unbelievable situations-- the inhuman reactions and behaviors of people. It was the combined events that had an effect of an all destroying acid, slowly eating the structures of my psychological immunity system. I felt as though I was dead. Only the physical exterior was left.

This state lasted for several months, until very slowly some psychological structures became perceivable and some activity returned again. It took more than one year until I decided for life at the beginning of 2000. This represented also a completely new beginning in professional and private concern. I came back to art, as well

but I did not execute any physical artwork since then. It is like the mission of my net-based artwork "Never wake up." It seems impossible to get rid of the shadows of the past.

"A Virtual Memorial" is a very important work that examines our humanity. Why did you feel it was important to create?

Humanity is not popular. Humanity and art represents something most art historians hate. Years ago, the director of a prominent Swiss art museum told me that humanity represents the expression of a certain ideology which has no place in art. Some people think that humanity does not fit in our contemporary society, while others take humanity on their banner to fight against humanity.

Humanity is an essential part of the human existence--who else could practice humanity than a human being? What other field would represent humanity better than art, since art represents another element of human existence.

Under the background of my life experiences, my project *A Virtual Memorial* is the environment where art and humanity meet each other. People who practice humanity are solidarian people. We all should be solidarian with all those who need our solidarity, people of other cultures, religions and environments or backgrounds. *A Virtual Memorial* represents in its own way a field of solidarity with all those who are forgotten by history.

If my project would be able to motivate or inspire only a few people to reflect upon their own position as human beings and their mission in the world, to reflect the meaning of art in this entire context, already this would be more than expected.

What was the significance of changing your name from "Wilfried Agricola" to "Agricola de Cologne" in the year 2000?

The change of name signalizes a new era in different ways. Valid since January 1, 2000, it symbolizes a new kind of art working, and how I see myself as an artist.

Wilfried Agricola represents the artist of the OLD MEDIA, "Agricola de Cologne" is a "brand" (everybody knows "Eau de Cologne") and represents the artist for New Media art working.

But this "brand" stands for humanism and humanity, as well, since in Renaissance times there were several humanists, philosophers, painters named "Agricola"; it symbolizes also my connection to Greek philosophy. The city of Cologne stands for a city of art and culture founded by the Romans 2000 years ago. It is now the city of the media. It is a place in Europe with the most television companies and a very important film industry. So the brand "Agricola de Cologne" stands for awareness for history, for humanity, for new media and for new ways in "approaching" art. Cologne is also a place where I love to live--the local people are very friendly, open and tolerant.

The creation of a network and collaboration appears to be a very important idea to you. Why?

There are different reasons. In first place, networking represents one of the most specific features of the Internet. It is always collaborating, but collaborating on the basis of an equal level. At its best, it is a collaborative between differently structured partners in order to produce variety. And this represents another Internet specific feature - ongoing process, not a finished result - the way is the goal.

Of course, this does not have much in common with the traditional definition of art because it cannot be sold in an art gallery, or collected, or be judged by art critics according pseudo-scientific static measures. To judge networking art, one has to be involved and be able to follow the dynamic movement networking produces. The entire construction of my [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork](#) represents nothing else than a gigantic dynamic artwork consisting of subordinated networking constructions as projects and subprojects.

Art networking - involving artists as partners - can have different goals. One of them is to create the most complex dynamic images or maybe better (virtual) sculptures that develop from the networking process. These are no physical images which can be hung on a wall or placed in a garden, the images develop through the reflecting of the more or less active user, visitor or viewer, this means that the entire network is unthinkable without the user, visitor or viewer, he/she represents another partner of the network: they transport the mission of the images not only internally, but also externally, which produces again another

networking effect.

Thus, this kind of working is always addressed to all networking partners and far beyond. In this way, it cannot be planned. Actually, networking represents always a kind of experimenting, because no one can foresee what the result of the networking will be, even if the goals are fixed. It is even much more an experiment because the goals are not clearly fixed but open for what might come.

Statistically seen, the [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork](#) fulfills one of my goals. Since August 2002, it hit the magic mark of over 100,000 hits a month.

Why do you feel that digital media and the Web are appropriate media for you at this point in your life?

I really regret that the digital media became available only in that advanced stage of my life and not years earlier, since the structures of digital media and the Internet correspond completely with the way I think. I program everything myself.

I made occasional digital works already many years before I focused my entire attention on New Media in 2000. In 1999, I began focusing my attention on programming languages and found Flash as a kind of developing environment that conforms to my ideas and kind of creative working. I am deeply entrenched in digital media and see no sense in creating physical artwork.

Since I finished studying, I was an independent artist. Independence had always a high priority in my life, in financial, personal and professional concern. In this way, I followed my personal ideas through the years, which did mostly not fit in the respective artistic concepts or ideologies of that time. My biography is an expression of this independence. The terror attack and the dramatic changes in my life enforced the wish for independence on one hand, but from this position also for communicating, collaborating, networking on the other hand, what the conventional environment of art cannot offer, at all. The virtual Internet represents the ideal environment for acting completely independently and creating new worlds, new correlations, networks or any other artistic constructions that can be developed in and from this virtual environment.

I know very well, that there is currently only a minority who accept the Internet as a serious artistic environment, but mostly because they have no knowledge or idea of the subject matter. On the other hand, in connecting to people who deal with the Internet in different ways, my work is well accepted.

My terror attack had also another consequence that I live and plan only for the very moment and not the long term. At present I am not able, yet, to plan concrete things years ahead, but only weeks or probably months ahead. The Internet and the ability to participate in many activities on short notice and rather spontaneously correspond exactly how I feel at present.

In previous periods of my life, I changed the artistic medium when I did not see any further development in it. The spectrum of digital media is so immense that no one would ever be able to use all the options these media offer. The technological development is so fast and so dramatic, that one can follow hardly any progress. Under these circumstances, I suppose it will take some time to get tired of the digital media and change the artistic fields again.

Agricola de Cologne currently resides in Germany. He can be reached by e-mail at: nc-agricowi@netcologne.de or info@agricola-de-cologne.de

His [NewMediaArtProjectNetwork](#) Website projects include:

<http://www.javamuseum.org/>
<http://www.engad.org/>
<http://www.a-virtual-memorial.org/>
<http://www.le-musee-divisioniste.org/>
<http://www.agricola-de-cologne.de/>
<http://www.nmartproject.net/>
<http://www.newmediafest.org/>