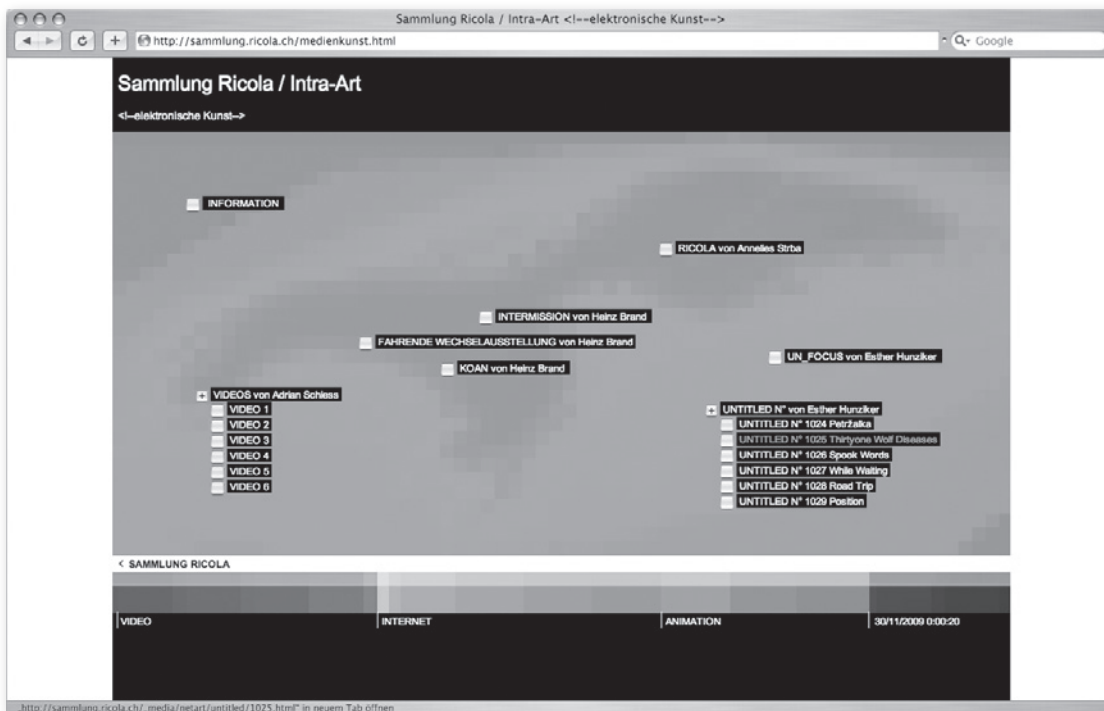


**ROMAN KURZMEYER
SWISS NET-BASED ART – A NEW CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF
THE RICOLA COLLECTION**

WITH THE ACQUISITION IN 2008 OF ESTHER HUNZIKER'S **UN_FOCUS** (2000), THE RICOLA COLLECTION OPENED A NEW CHAPTER IN ITS LONG HISTORY: IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT A NET-BASED WORK OF ART FOUND ITS WAY INTO THE COMPANY'S COLLECTION. ROMAN KURZMEYER OUTLINES THE COLLECTION'S HISTORY AND THE EFFORTS TO INTRODUCE THE PERSONNEL TO NEW MEDIA ART AND CURRENT TENDENCIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART.



Ricola Collection: navigation of the intranet webpage

In his article «Esther Hunzikers Projekt-Galerie un_focus: Ein titlungsloses Palimpsest und andere medienkritische Stücke» (2002), the media theorist Roberto Simanowski called this work «a fine collection of experiments in which the various possibilities of digital rhetoric are demonstrated in the best textbook manner.»¹ In other words, this was a very wise first step in the exploration of a new area of collecting art. In addition to owning an offline version, the Ricola Collection is mentioned on the title page of this work and was issued a certificate in which the artist describes the work and its conditions of use. With the acquisition of this important net-based artwork, the owner agrees to let the artist keep the work online (www.ref17.net/unfocus) and freely accessible as long as technical conditions and feasibility permit. Along with this work, Ricola also acquired a series of flash movies by Hunziker with the title **Untitled No 1024 – No 1029** (2003 – 05)². These six works are divided into as many subjects and feature photographs, drawings, graphics, sounds and music that can be animated by mouse clicks. Unlike **un_focus** (2000), which was sold to the Ricola Collection as an original, the other works by Esther Hunziker were marketed as editions.

This move into the field of online art is not intended to supersede the traditional media in the collection, but to complete them. The paintings, drawings, photographs and installations of the Ricola Collection are exhibited in the company's buildings and facilities, and the personnel can access the online art via the firm's internal intranet site. The few older video and animation works in the firm's collection can also be viewed on this site.

¹ Cf. <http://www.xcult.org/unfocus/meta/index.htm> [02.2010].

² <http://www.ref17.net/untitled> [03.2010].

HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION³

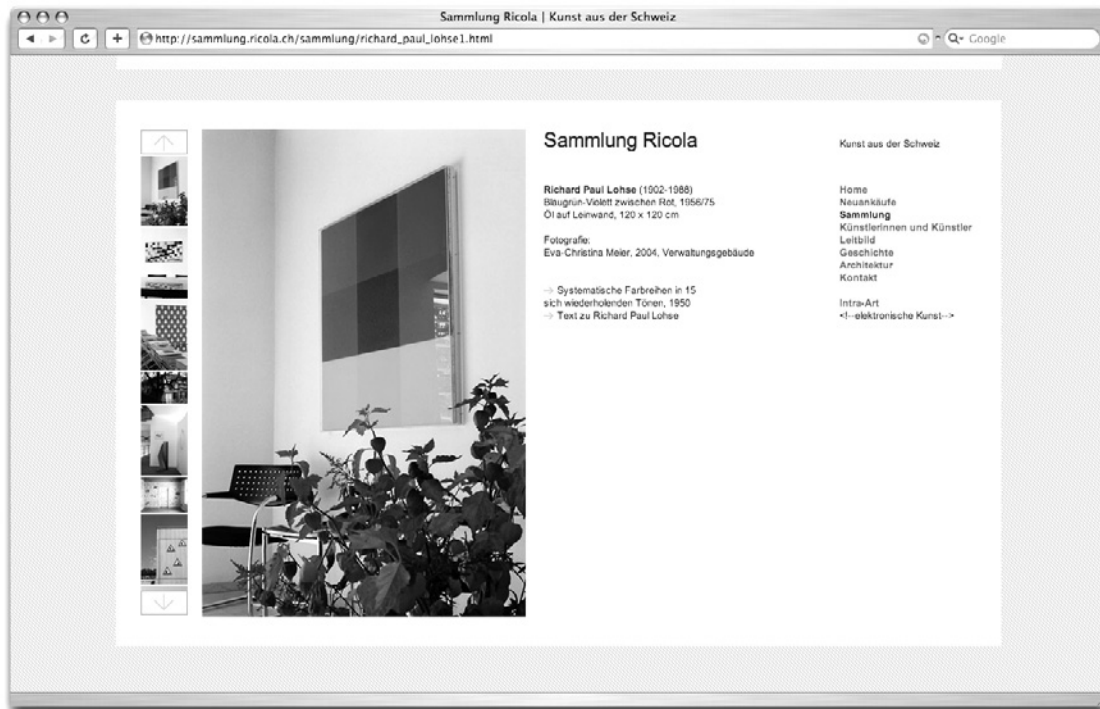
The Ricola AG company in Laufen (CH) manufactures herbal candy and employs 350 persons worldwide, exporting its products to 50 European, Asian and North-American countries. The company was founded in the 1930s by Emil Richterich-Beck, a man of modest background who took the step from running a bakery to manufacturing candy at a time of growing economic and social uncertainty. As a successful entrepreneur it was a matter of course for him that he also had a cultural and social responsibility. He began to collect contemporary art in the 1940s, starting with paintings, prints and sculpture by artists in his home region, the Laufental. Thanks to this activity he enjoyed lifelong friendships with artists like Jacques Düblin, Albert Schilling and especially August Cueni, whose work Richterich-Beck supported throughout his career. In the 1950s and 60s, he expanded his collection of local and regional art to include works by important 20th-century Swiss painters like Cuno Amiet, Hans Berger, Wilhelm Gimmi, Max Gubler, Giovanni Giacometti and René Auberjonois. The works were exhibited in Emil and Rosa Richterich-Beck's apartment on Baselstrasse 31 in Laufen and in the adjacent company offices.

Their sons Hans Peter and Alfred Richterich created the Ricola Collection proper in 1975 and it has been growing ever since. The collection includes Swiss art from the 1950s onward and is displayed in the buildings of the Ricola Group; not just in the areas accessible to the public but also in the hallways, offices, lounges, meeting rooms and, whenever possible, in the factory spaces themselves. The works in the collection can be seen at the company headquarters in Laufen, as well as in their domestic and foreign subsidiaries. At the American plant, for example, there are works by Swiss artists who worked in the U.S.A. The collection begins with the early works of the Zurich concretists, with a special emphasis by Alfred Richterich on the artists Richard Paul Lohse and Camille Graeser. It includes important paintings of art-theoretical inspiration from the last decades and up to the present and the youngest generation of Swiss artists. In addition to individual works, mostly from the artists' early periods, the Ricola Collection presents series of works of special relevance by artists such as Helmut Federle, Guido Nussbaum, John Armleder, Jacques Herzog, Adrian Schiess, or, among the younger artists, Christine Streuli, Shirana Shahbazi and Mai-Thu Perret.

COLLECTING

One of the purposes of collecting art is to shape tradition. This is true of art collections in general, but even more so of collections of contemporary art, since only in retrospect can we see the part played by the collector in defining current trends. The task of a collection of recent art is to elaborate a

³ For a more exhaustive treatment with illustrations, see Roman Kurzmeier (ed.), *Sammlung Ricola: Kunst aus der Schweiz* («The Ricola Collection: Art from Switzerland»), Laufen: Ricola Holding, 2005.

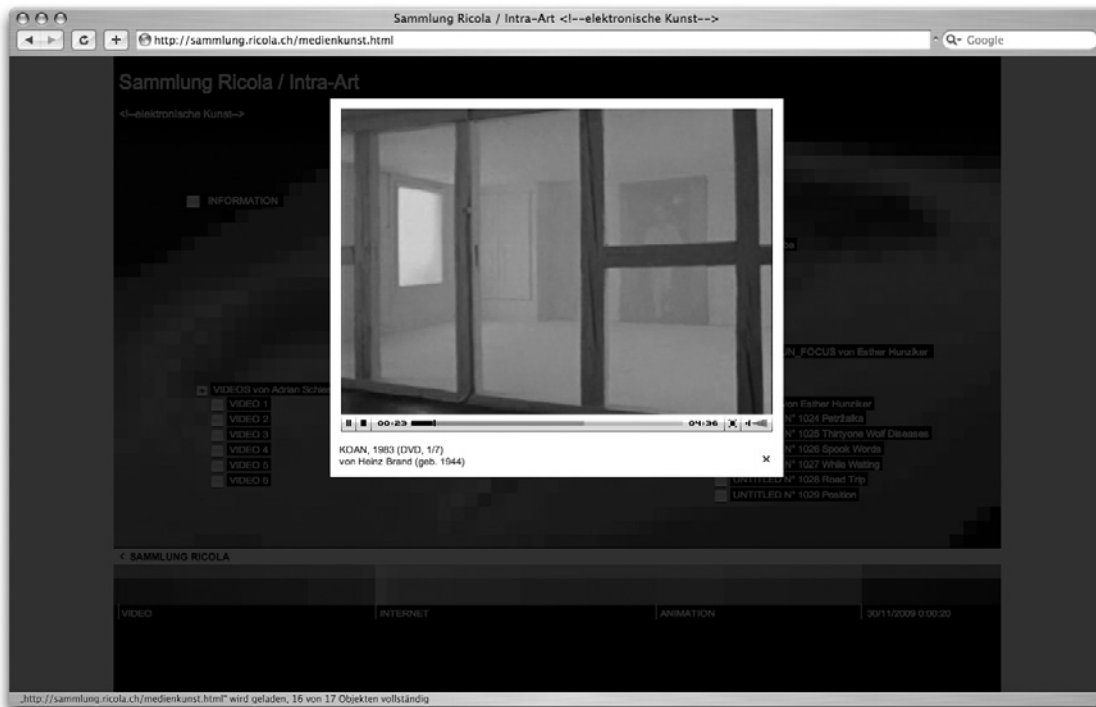


Ricola Collection: intranet collection catalogue

picture and idea of what this new art is through a selection of representative works. This not only permits a learning process for the collector himself but also offers an approach to those who look at the collection. This task can be accomplished only within the context of all the objects in the collection. Collecting therefore demands time, as well as financial resources, interest in art and a certain flair. It is a cultural activity in the basic sense of the word, a selection process in which the incipient criteria of the beginnings crystallize in the course of time.

The Ricola collectors initially focused almost exclusively on the then-contemporary painting production. The decision to collect works of electronic and net-based art has been balanced by a surprising new strategy: the acquisition of 20th-century works that are particularly relevant to the art of today. This new strategy has led to the acquisition of a box by the Winterthur artist Clara Friedrich-Jezler (1894 – 1969) and two works by the Aargau painter Rudolf Urech-Seon (1876 – 1959), whose late period was characterized by a very personal and lyrical abstraction. Clara Friedrich participated in the pioneer exhibition «Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik»⁴ at the Kunsthaus in Zurich in 1936, experienced a certain success, but then stopped working as an artist. Her work is correspondingly sparse and represented mostly in museums, with very little of it appearing on the art market. For all her innovations, Clara Friedrich remains one of the great unknown figures in the recent art history of Switzerland. Accordingly, her work has had little ef-

⁴ **Zeitprobleme in der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik** («Problems in Contemporary Swiss Painting and Sculpture»), Exhibition of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft at the Kunsthaus Zurich, June 13–July 22 1936.



Ricola Collection: work presentation of electronic art on the intranet (Heinz Brand)

fect beyond a small circle of initiates. This new acquisition is stroke of luck for the Ricola Collection: Friedrich's box piece is a dynamic assemblage consisting of a painted glass on top of a painted cardboard box. Her piece completes the works of the Zurich concretists in the Ricola Collection and anticipates later developments in 20th-century art. In this work we can see that the relativity and alterability of visual images had already become a central concern back then - and not just recently in net-based art.

DISSEMINATION

The collecting of 20th-century Swiss art and the presentation of these works in the offices and plants of the Ricola group plays a major part in the firm's cultural policy, as well as being an expression of its integrative cultural concept. The basic aim of the collectors and company owners is to create a meaningful work environment. The decoration of this environment with artworks whose value and meaning in many cases has not yet been established or has changed since their acquisition, gives employees the opportunity to occupy themselves with the intellectual trends and ideas in their culture and see how they work. The acquisition of net-based art does not appreciably change this basic concept. Net-based art uses a new medium that has become an integral part of our daily lives and radically changed the work environment. Its dissemination calls for new forms. While paintings, drawings,

photographs, objects and installations can be displayed in the offices and other workspaces and are directly accessible, the works of net-based art can only be viewed individually and in their own «space» on a computer.

The Ricola Collection website designed by Esther Hunziker makes these different spaces visible. The website presents information about the collection's history, the collectors' philosophy, the firm's cultural and architectural policy, as well as the artists represented in the collection. It also provides a virtual tour of the works on display in the company buildings. There is a separate site called «Intra-Art» that opens into the virtual space of the electronic artworks. The paintings, drawings, photographs, objects and installations in the collection are all shown in situ, which enables viewers to contextualize the art within the work spaces and see documents of the physical presence of the artworks in their environment. The number of works shown on the site is continually increasing, apace with their presentation. Artworks that have never been put on public display are not shown on the website. This website documents our efforts at dissemination. It gives the employees a glimpse of the artworks, as well as of the archival work in progress. For example, individual artists are invited each year to talk about their work to the personnel; in the future these events will be filmed and viewable on the website.

The Ricola Collection is still in an indefinite initial phase as far as the collection of net-based art is concerned. In addition to the selective expansion of this collection and the corresponding reflection about the definition of space and place through these artworks, there is also the pressing question as to the possibilities and limits in rooting contemporary art in the everyday work environment. Unlike the artworks on public display, which cannot be ignored in the work environment - and so stimulate the personnel to make remarks and ask questions - the website and the net-based art presented on it are visible only to those who are curious and interested enough to visit the site online.

Translated from the German by Jean-Marie Clarke

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