

## AN ARTIST WHO BREAKS BOUNDARIES

By Andreas Wrede



FOTO: FELIX BARTLETT

For Richard Wagner's great-great-grandson Antoine, art is his nationality: a portrait of the photographer, sculptor and director

The artist Antoine Wagner is a cosmopolitan, he embodies the untamed citizen of the world, his nationality is art. His mother is a German citizen, his father a French citizen. Antoine Wagner himself was born in the USA. He lives and works in Tyrol, London, New York City and Woodstock. "Music is very important to me "There are reasons for this: Antoine Wagner - the great-great-great-grandson of Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and the great-great-great-great-grandson of Franz Liszt (1811-1886) - works in an interdisciplinary and multi-visual way. Photography and video art, installations, painting and sculptures, performances and more. Sound design is just as close to him as the staging of an opera.

In conversation, Wagner often and unconsciously switches from German to French, Italian or English and back again. He says: "I have no tongue of courage", laughing freely and cheerfully. Wagner looks like a rock star: long hair, full beard, casual style, somewhere between Carhartt and Patagonia. He was adventurous from an early age, for example at the Richard Wagner Festival in Bayreuth: "As a little boy, I used to sneak into the wings every year in Bayreuth and listen quietly - music is very important to me."

In 2015, Wagner composed the accompanying music for an extensive exhibition at the then Völkerkunde-Museum in Hamburg. The exhibition was entitled "Exile". It featured haunting, over-dimensional portraits of migrants living in Germany. Wagner's categorical statement for humanity. Given Richard Wagner's biography, it is obvious that he was moved by the subject of exile.

The composer himself lived in exile in Zurich from 1849 to 1858. "I followed Wagner's escape route from Germany to Switzerland," Antoine Wagner recounts, his slender hands flying through the air with emphatic enthusiasm. He won the Prix de l'Académie Lyrique Pierre Bergé for his photo essay "Wagner in Switzerland". He studied at Northwestern University near Chicago and the renowned Sciences Po University in Paris theater studies and politics. "And I was very lucky to be able to assist Oscar-winner Michael Haneke with the remake of Funny Games. It was fabulous to stand and learn alongside a brilliant director."

His works are in demand and admired worldwide

In addition to his own Arte film about the pop band Phoenix, Antoine Wagner made videos with Vanessa Paradis, Johnny Hallyday (1943-2017) and Kate Moss. This was followed by the documentary "Wagner: A Genius in Exile" in 2013. The first of his now numerous international exhibitions took place in 2011: "Escaped Landscapes" showed photographs, and he has been artist-in-residence twice: in 2005 at Robert Wilson's legendary Water Mill Center on Long Island off the coast of New York and in 2014 at the illustrious Villa Medici, the outpost of the French Academy of Arts in Rome. In the New World Center in Miami, designed by Frank Gehry, Wagner staged the second act of "Die Walküre" using multimedia. Antoine Wagner's works can now be seen in New York, Tokyo, Singapore, Paris, Shanghai, London and Brussels, among other places.

At the end of 2023, the gallery "The Fridge" in New York City showed a series of paintings entitled "A Distant Closeness", which are reminiscent of natural forces. They are inspired by a journey through the pristine Japanese national park of Yakushima. In these works on acrylic, Wagner has integrated ash, sand and earth. New York art critics have attributed to him "a remarkable meditative quality and a powerful, almost tangible energy". That describes his style, when he prefers to work "ten or twelve hours" at night, "forgetting everything because I'm caught up in the momentum". Of course, that doesn't stop him from going for an ice-cold swim every early morning, as the art historian Carola Blumenfeld once put it: "Antoine Wagner's choice of images, like Bill Viola's, is a paradox. Ambitious in his choice, but above all a source of immense freedom."

This could be seen at two exhibitions in London at the beginning of the year, and another is currently running at Tristan Hoare's gallery: "Antoine Wagner: Maria Callas" is a photographic series of stage curtains from famous opera houses in which the diva (1923-1977) performed. Wagner comments: "For me, the stage curtain is an integral part of the immersive nature of the opera spectacle".