A Synthesis of Innovative Art and Architecture

Transparent architecture, public space and interactive media art blending together into a unique experience that motivates users and passers-by to engage in an encounter with the structure—this was the artistic concept the Ars Electronica Futurelab Linz designed into SAP's new regional headquarters in Berlin.

Linz/Berlin (February 27, 2004). Modern art that is open, inviting and fully integrated into a work of architecture premieres today on Rosenthaler Straße in Berlin Mitte, a lively district in the center of the German capital. After sundown, the new SAP regional headquarters in Berlin will begin to delight city residents and visitors with an imaginative play of color and form. But the design of the new headquarters facility goes far beyond creative lighting. Bits and bytes enable passers-by to enter into a dialog with the structure and to actively influence media art installations organically linked to the building's architecture.

"Digital Aquarium"

Especially impressive is the nightly animation of the structure's modern aluminum and glass exterior. Input from passers-by transforms the façade into a richly detailed world of computer graphics whose diversity and dynamism conjure up the oceans' incredible variety of life forms. This is accomplished by software that media artists Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman developed for their installation "The Hidden World of Noise and Voice." Microphones mounted on the building's exterior record ambient sounds—for instance, the voice of

someone walking past. For every sound picked up by the microphones, the computer produces animated 3-D graphics whose form, color and movement correspond to the sound's pitch, tone and intensity. For example, the sound of fingers snapping is depicted as a small graphic explosion; a bass note produces a thick blob. And these computer graphics are not simply stand-alone entities; once created, they take on a dynamic life of their own and begin to behave like they're alive. These "creatures" programmed with "artificial life algorithms" react to each other. Their conduct resembles that of a school of fish, and this virtual transformation of the building into a sort of giant "digital aquarium" provides observers with a colorful and impressive experience.

Harmonious Interaction between a Building and its Human Users

In addition to this large-scale animation, there are other installations that invite visitors to engage in interaction. For example, a sensor mounted right next to the main entrance on the building's façade is activated when someone places his/her hand on it. It then measures that person's pulse, and, for a short time thereafter, all of the building's projections begin to throb in sync with that individual's heartbeat. Thus, the entire complex technical system and the major piece of architecture in which it is set briefly respond to input from a single human being as the entire corporate facility pulses to the frequency of that person's heart.

Successful Integration of Media Art, Architecture and Advertising

This Berlin regional headquarters project opens up new dimensions of an "art-architecture synthesis" in a number of respects. The media installation makes it possible to establish a

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dialog among the building, its surroundings and the people walking in and around it, and thus conveys to the architecture an active role in its physical setting.

In addition, the project represents a successful effort to jointly position art and advertising in a public space without art being relegated to the role of merely "upgrading" the ads. Evening hours (when projections have their greatest impact) are exclusively reserved for art, whereby there is a clear separation from the firm's commercial messages displayed during the day.

In the future, this media installation will also be utilized as a media art "gallery" and will be made available first and foremost as a showcase for the Berlin art scene.

The partnership formed by SAP and Ars Electronica in 2002 was designed as a prototype for new models of cooperation at the interface of art, business, technology and society. The collaboration has ranged from media art presentations at SAP-hosted events and pioneering forms of information visualization to joint research projects and innovative social initiatives.

With queries, contact:
Wolfgang A. Bednarzek
Press Officer, Ars Electronica

AEC Ars Electronica Center Linz
Museumsgesellschaft mbH
Hauptstraße 2, 4040 Linz, Austria

Tel +43.732.7272-38
Mobil +43.664.81 26 156
Fax +43.732.7272-638

mail to:wolfgang.bednarzek@aec.at
http://www.aec.at/press.asp