Ars Electronica 2004

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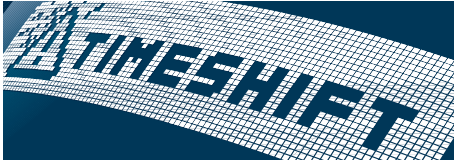
ARS ELECTRONICA 2004
Timeshift – The World in 25 Years
The 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Festival of Art, Technology and Society

A look back at a quarter century of digital media culture in the context of art, technology and society, as well as a look forward in anticipation of the next 25 years of artistic transformation and cultural change will highlight Ars Electronica 2004. Timeshift is the title of this year's festival, an encounter with the past and the future.

Point of Departure: The Last 25 Years

Ars Electronica stands for nurturing communication and building bridges, as well as for provocation and confrontation. Since 1979, artists, scientists, philosophers and theoreticians have been convening and encountering highly diverse audiences in the vibrant atmosphere of the festival and discussing the interplay among art, technological innovation and mankind's entire social sphere. An orientation on pure media theory has just as little to do with the essence of Ars Electronica as manifestations of the various phobias or euphoria evoked by high-tech. At the same time, Ars Electronica is a stage for the presentation of new artistic practices, for crossing the borders of the doable and permissible, and exploring the possibilities afforded by digital media and communications technologies as applied to art. A hybrid complex of new media, innovative tools, and novel framework conditions affecting the production, marketing and partaking of art has had a powerful impact on how artists work and what they turn out—a developmental process that is not even close to culmination.

Ars Electronica has also become a significant source of influence in the process of cultural and economic change that has been underway in Linz, a city that has come to epitomize the municipality whose orientation on the future is not just a question of commerce and industry, but rather one that is envisioned primarily as a cultural undertaking.

Solidly rooted in the cultural landscape of Linz, the Ars Electronica Festival, Prix Ars Electronica, the Ars Electronica Center and the Ars Electronica Futurelab today constitute a media culture complex at the heart of a global network, a facility whose constellation and substantive orientation make it unique throughout the world.

The enormous archive that has taken shape since 1979 constitutes powerful testimony to the manifold currents and trends of the last 25 years. On the basis of the experience thus amassed and in keeping with its mission as an instrument of social analysis, Ars Electronica 2004 will also be dedi-

cated to the question of whether ongoing social development—in the sense of a learning curve derived from the past and applied to the future—is possible.

Theme: The Next 25 Years

Twenty-five years of rapid change lie behind us. The incredible dynamism of technological develop-ment during this period has changed the world. Which themes are stacking up as the essential issues of the next quarter century?

Will key technologies lead to another technological revolution that will change our lives as funda-mentally as digital media have done? A glance at current stock market trends quickly reveals that nanotechnology is likely to become the most important key technology of them all and one whose impact will cut across the borders of all sectors and fields, for it is here that the laws of physics con-verge with chemical properties and biological principles. Nanotechnology transcends the boundaries separating mechanics, information science, biology and chemistry. TechNouveau means the reverse engineering of nature, and completely new classes of materials give us good reason to expect a "reinvention of nature." Not silicon but organic molecules will form the core of the ultra-fast com-puters of tomorrow. Molecular medicine, anti-aging, tissue culture, genetically modified foods and cloning are further stages in our assertion of power over nature.

If nanotechnology is indeed emerging as the cutting edge of high-tech, how are we to deal with this? The current discussion is spinning its wheels generating jubilant pronouncements heralding the fantastic possibilities of this new technology. Will the inevitable reaction be a stance diametrical-ly opposed to this attempt at popularization: sowing the seeds of hysteria in the face of its dangers? Will it ever be possible to objectively discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a new technology in a way that does not degenerate into populist propaganda designed to impart a positive or nega-tive spin and that serves as a solid basis for decisions about its implementation? Furthermore, which social developments will be the upshots of such new technologies, and what other areas of social confrontation fed by technological progress can we anticipate?

What will ignite the next generation's potential energy for protest? What will fuel the forward mobility of the kids of the cybergeneration? Burghers of a networked civil society revolting against blanket surveillance by the state? Global communities aligned in opposition to the global economy? Climatic change and a hydrogen-based energy sector? An increasingly elderly society? Delimitation of migration? Fundamentalism and the fear of terrorism?

What course will the ongoing development of digital media art take? The growing acceptance of these art forms, the increasing presence of at least some of its genres in top museums and the best galleries, and the rapidly rising number of educational institutions providing instruction to new media artists of the future have also induced more and more art historians and theorists to consider digital art. Their efforts to establish a canon are necessary though, for the most part, hopeless undertakings that have met with skepticism on the part of many artists and professionals active in this field.

Does society learn from its experiences with the emergence and proliferation of new technologies, or will people's approaches to high-tech innovation continue to waver between hype and hysteria, and keep on reflecting the polarization of industrial interests on one hand and anxieties on the other?

1979 – 2004 – 2029

"I'll throw the damned rearview mirror out of the damned window because I don't want to know where I'm coming from but where I'm going," Frank Lloyd Wright, American architect and seminal thinker, is purported to have said once in the '30s, and indeed he did actually break off the car's

rearview mirror and throw it out of the window. What a great anecdote! But that was before the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Vietnam, before Chernobyl, before 9/11 and the Iraq War, before the discovery of the DNA double helix, the cloning of Dolly the sheep, and the deciphering and patenting of the entire genome, before the development of the transistor, the age of digital simulation, the development of the Internet and the triumphal advance of cell phones and computer games... which is quite a lot of future making itself evident in our rearview mirror.

"Timeshift" will confront the realm of friction and interplay where the future meets the past, and come to grips with the question of whether social development in the sense of a learning curve is possible. After all, even while our gaze is trained in front of us, we shouldn't completely lose sight of the way we've come.

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Information on the Ars Electronica Festival: http://www.aec.at/timeshift
and the Ars Electronica Press Lounge: http://www.aec.at/press